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Earl Ford McNaughton
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A blood-stirring novel of a tempestuous chapter in American history written by men with steady gun hands and steadier hearts.

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Cherokee Fowler

By CHUCK STANLEY

Author of "Quick Trigger," "Wild Cayuses" *and* "The Iron Cayuse"

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CHEROKEE FOWLER

CHAPTER I

The mixed train of the Kansas and Texas puffed along a stretch of the north bank of the Arkansas River just west of Arkansas City. Young Clayton Fowler was up in the cattle car that jogged behind the big-stacked engine and the dust-blowing tender. He had his arm slung across the neck and mane of his horse Ranger. The animal was a sleek-looking gelding, with a grayish coat, and showed the advantages of Morgan strain and Kentucky breeding.

Fowler was clean-shaven, and his blond hair was bleached by months and years of prairie suns. At twenty-five he had already seen seven or eight years service with the Indian-fighting commanders on the frontier, and had a warm spot in his heart for Nelson A. Miles, Phil Sheridan, General Crook and others of their coterie.

Ordinarily he would have been wearing twin guns, tied down low on his high-booted flanks. But now there appeared little need for demonstrating his skill with the six-gun.

There were several other horses in the stock car, belonging to men riding farther back in the dusty coaches, who were planning to take part

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in one of the big events in American frontier history, the opening of the Cherokee Outlet.

The train clattered across a trestle bridge over the wide Arkansas River, and a shower of sparks from the stack billowed out over the cars. As Fowler's hand caressed the mane of his horse, his eyes roamed along the dusty roads on either side of the railroad track between the train and the Oklahoma Border.

There were several men checking on their horses in the slatted cattle car, and one of them came over toward Fowler. He studied the young frontiersman carefully, then asked:

"Ever seen anything like this before?"

"Sure thing," Fowler replied. "I was out here four years ago, when they opened up the tract of two million acres, bought by the Government from the Indians. That was a sight. There were something like twenty thousand people all set to bust out into the country at twelve o'clock noon on the day of the opening."

Even as he spoke, Fowler saw the covered wagons moving along the roads. Here and there men rode on horseback and led pack animals. Ox-teams moved with their peculiar shoulder motion, and there were several men astride the high-wheeled bicycles of the period.

Fowler's companion looked over the Ranger horse belonging to the young scout, and put out a hand to touch it. The gray gelding whipped its head around, and Fowler said with a chuckle:

"He's a one-man horse, Mister. You'd better stand clear."

"Is that so?" the fellow retorted harshly. The young Missouri soldier of fortune studied the fellow and was on the alert when the burly-looking stranger said:

"This here land race is going to the man who has the best horse and knows how to ride him."

"That sounds logical," Fowler agreed. He tried to act uninterested, but was on the alert, and wondering now why he hadn't taken his gun belt and Colts from his blanket roll which was stacked in a corner of the stock car. This fellow was looking for trouble.

"You've got a right nice-looking gelding there," declared the rough and ready frontiersman. "I'm going to make a swap with you."

Clayton Fowler hadn't exactly expected anything like this, but in the past he had learned how to play the game of give and take, and he knew that a flat refusal would gain him nothing.

"I like to know who I'm doing business with," he declared, "especially in a horse trade."

The stranger puffed up, spread his legs to withstand the jarring movement of the train, then opened a cavernous red mouth to lick the edges of a black beard and said:

"I'm Pug Bates. I reckon if you've been on this frontier very long, you've heard tell of me." A curious smile lighted the corners of the man's eyes, and Fowler studied him with new interest.

Back in 1889, when the big land rush was held in Oklahoma along the North Canadian River, there were a group of claim jumpers who were accused of chasing hundreds of people off their property. With the Territory unorganized at the time, and the claim jumpers heavily armed, there had been little that could be done about it. This group had included a notorious gun-fighter named Pug Bates who had blustered his way through such frontier towns as Hays, Dodge City, Abilene, and a number of others. Now he was here on his way to the opening of the Cherokee Outlet.

Undoubtedly the rest of his gun hung crew would be on hand, working for some land-hungry octopus who was anxious to defy the United States Government, and rob the citizens who saw in the broad acres of the Oklahoma Territory the chance for a new life for themselves and their families.

"I've heard of you, Bates," Fowler said calmly. He studied the bearded man for some moments, his hand still caressing the mane of his gray gelding. Then he declared: "I'm not trading horses."

Pug Bates hesitated for a moment, as though he hadn't heard Fowler correctly. Then he moved forward until he was standing almost at arm's length from the man.

"I don't think you heard right, younker," Bates said. "I said I was swapping horses with you. That's the end of it. Ain't it, boys?" He turned to several men gathered just inside the open door of the cattle car, and one of them nodded.

Clayton Fowler dropped his hand from the gelding's mane. His whole body tightened up for a moment like a compressed spring; then he relaxed and studied Bates.

"Ranger isn't going to no border blackguard in a gun swap, Mister, not while I'm around."

Pug Bates gnawed on the edge of his beard again, a cruel gleam came into his eyes, and he advanced toward the young scout.

"That's something I aim to take care of, too. This coffee grinder we've got on the front end of this train ain't any great shakes when it comes to dragging out the miles; but I reckon it's going fast enough to scrape plenty of skin off your torso, was you to go through that door there and down onto the gravel."

Clayton said nothing, preferring to save his breath for the fight he knew was coming. He stepped backward until his toe was hooked under the corner of his duffle bag, wondering whether there would be a chance to dive for the rolled gunbelt it contained. He knew that a fellow like Pug Bates would think nothing of shooting an unarmed man. He would gun him down and then buckle the belt about him and claim self-defense, particularly when he was backed by several of his henchmen.

Pug Bates hesitated for a moment; then, with a glance over his shoulder at his pards, he said:

"Maybe you'd like a little something to boot. I reckon my crow-bait ain't nothing like the animal you've got. What say?"

"There's no trade," Fowler insisted. "You're wasting your time, and mine, too."

Now the animals in the car sensed that there was a disturbance going on, and they became restless. Several of the horses pawed the heavy flooring and kicked splinters out into the open space between the two stall ends of the car. One of them struck the leather strapping that went across the car, and sparks flew up.

Clayton Fowler moved aside as Ranger bunched his feet beneath him. It was at this moment that Pug Bates chose to land a blow alongside the young Missouri man's ear. Fowler was staggered by the cowardly attack, and his shoulders banged against the slats. One hand gripped the boards as he tried to push himself to his feet. But Pug Bates was swarming all over him, and landing lefts and rights upon Fowler's unprotected face as he was sprawled over his luggage.

"Uncle?" asked Bates with a leer. "I like a man what knows when he's been licked. It takes a real fellow to admit that. We can be friends after this deal is over. After all, why get so het up over a couple of horses? We're not a pack of Injuns."

Fowler was glad to let the man talk, for it gave him an opportunity to regain his own strength, and halted for a time the rain of blows Bates was flinging at him. Finally the scout lunged forward and Bates' heavy body lurched backward against the gray gelding.

Ranger let out a whinny of surprise; then his forelegs smashed against Bates' back and sent the bully sprawling near the open door. The burly brute was taken by surprise, as were his companions. Fowler considered the opportunity as heaven-sent. He rolled over and found the string throat of his duffle bag without delay. His range-quick hand darted into the bundle and caught the rolled leather of his gunbelt. He whipped it out and a six-gun dropped into his palm.

Pug Bates had regained some of his senses now, and his hairy hand closed over the walnut butt of his own gun. He brought the weapon up carefully, not having noticed Fowler's move, and under the impression that the Missouri man was still slick-hipped.

"Okay," Bates snarled, "so the horse trade is off. I wouldn't ride no gray devil who thought he could kick me around when the notion possessed him. But you ain't going to swap him with no one else, either."

Pug Bates lurched to his feet, his cohorts closed in about him, and he leveled his gun at the bobbing head of the gray gelding. His finger tightened on the trigger, and Fowler, realizing that Bates had now turned his ire from the owner to the horse, swung up his own six-gun and shouted:

"You trigger that six-gun, Bates, and you'll be knocking at the Pearly Gates."

For answer Bates squeezed trigger, but there was a roaring blast in the stock car a split-second ahead of the bully's. Fowler's Colt exploded and the bullet ripped into the fleshy part of Bates' shoulder. The gunman's shot went through the roof, and the confined area of the car was filled with the odor of burned powder.

Several of the horses whinnied; others pulled back on their halters as though anxious to get away. Fowler moved forward now, and stood in front of the restless gelding. He looked at Bates and said:

"You called off the horse trade, but if you're of a mind to swap lead, just step up and say so." Bates, his hand pressing against the bloody shoulder, was of no mind to argue. Fowler's eagle eyes leaped to the others in the circle, and he asked:

"Any of you like to take up Bates' taw?"

"Not any," replied one of the hirelings, and the others appeared to share his feelings.

Fowler holstered his gun slowly, went back to soothe his horse and quiet the others in the car. Then he said:

"I'm putting my mark on all of you gunslicks. I know just what sort of stripe you skunks are wearing, and I'm telling you that I'll see that you don't make trouble for decent people here in the outlet, like you did back East of here. If you've got some tricky land shark fronting for you, you'd better tell him what I've said."

There was mumbling and muttering among the quartette. But none of them directed even casual words toward the Missourian. Finally a big brakeman and the train conductor dropped down inside the stock car and looked over the situation. The brakeman went over to Bates while the conductor stopped alongside Fowler and asked:

"What's up here?"

"Feller there had a hunch I was an easy mark for a horse trade. Tried to best me in a knuckle party, but when the horse kicked him, he decided to gun the gelding. I resented it."

Fowler described the scene as though it were a bean bag game at a picnic. The conductor, a grizzled old-timer who had seen his share of Indians and renegades while on the Kansas-Texas run, nodded his head in understanding. Then he looked over the gelding and said:

"Son, that's a horse worth fighting for."

Fowler smiled, and declared:

"He'll do a mite of fighting for me, too. He proved that right here this afternoon."

"When'll we hit Caldwell Junction?" one of the other men asked.

The conductor looked at him for a moment, winked to Fowler and said:

"We'll be there about five o'clock. And we'll be on time." Then he turned to Clayton and in a whisper asked:

"You got any idea who you're bucking up against?"

"I reckon," Fowler replied soberly. "Hombre by the name of Bates. Rode in here in the spring of 1889. Had quite a bit of trouble with the Army and the Cherokee Scouts. But I figure he and his crew stole thousands of acres from the settlers. Do you reckon we're going to be up against that here in the Outlet?"

"Mister," the conductor said soberly, "people don't change their ways. A man who's wearing the brand of the devil will wear it until he trades his six-gun for a pitchfork. You'd be doing right if you aimed about six inches to the right of where you planted your slug on Bates. People like me and the ones you'll meet up ahead would be thanking you."

Fowler nodded soberly. Now he took the time to fasten his gunbelt about his waist, and settle it firmly on his hips. He tied down the twin holsters, checked the slide of the weapons, and went over the gleaming brass cartridges to make sure they were fully loaded.

"That's the trouble about the law out here," Fowler remarked. "It's too kind to a man. Kansas is a state, like you know, and what goes on in these trains is the state's business. Like now, you'll have to report this, and then what'll happen?"

"Nothing much," the conductor assured him.

"But when the law moves into Oklahoma, things are going to be different."

"Meaning?" prompted the conductor.

"Gun law," Fowler replied, "in a tied-down holster."

The conductor looked at the twin guns on Fowler's legs; then his eyes went over the six-foot-three form of the man, and stopped as he noticed Fowler's thumb hooked in a small pocket of his belt just to the left of the buckle.

"So that's the way of it?" the conductor asked, and held forth a gnarled hand. Fowler took it frankly. "I wish you all the luck in the world, Mister."

There was silence in the stock car except for the tramping of the restless horses, and the clanking of the draw-bars and shackles. The locomotive let out a defiant whistle, and Fowler looked out over the parched fields on both sides of the track. There was a gleam of water where a small creek flowed up from the south to empty into the Arkansas River.

"Payne's Creek," the conductor explained. "Plenty of the folks waiting for the signal gun are camping along the creek. It's the only good fresh water around here. Got something of a tent city up ahead, right where we cut south with the rail line into Oklahoma."

Fowler nodded in acknowledgment of this information. The train was slowing down now. The Missouri man gathered his duffle about him, and darted a single look in the direction of Bates and his men. The wounded gunman studied his tormentor for several moments, then pushed away from the brakeman, lunged to his feet and said:

"Mister, you've carved a name for yourself on a granite stone. I'm going to match you up with it."

"You ain't worth a hunk of granite," Fowler retorted. "You'll be lucky to get a board in Boot Hill."

CHAPTER 2

Payne's Creek was a ghost town of canvas and covered wagons, hugging the Kansas and Texas railroad track on the edge of the Oklahoma Territory. It seemed to know that it was a ghost town, and would vanish with the firing of the signal cannon at noon on September 16th, 1893.

The Cherokee Outlet, or the Cherokee Strip, as it is sometimes known, was a broad expanse of prairie country which was about sixty miles wide and two hundred miles long. It ran roughly from the west bank of the Arkansas river to the Oklahoma Panhandle, and was known as the Outlet, because it was originally set out to permit the Cherokee Indians to travel to the buffalo country in the West without trespassing upon the hunting grounds of the other Indian tribes sharing the Indian Territory with them.

The area of the Outlet, and the fact that it was located just south of the settled farming areas of Kansas, made it accessible to one of the largest groups of people ever to assemble for a western land rush. Experienced observers such as Clayton Fowler realized, however, that in the group lined up along the southern border of Kansas there were a good many renegades and members of the lawless tribe, and only a relatively small group of real farmers.

Even those who had come to the jumping-off place in covered wagons with their families and household goods were not always the type most desirable for this sort of frontier pioneering.

As the Kansas and Texas train pulled into the siding at Payne's Creek, it was brought to a halt. Many people were planning to make the run into the Cherokee Outlet on the train, and the Army officials and the railroad people had agreed that there was to be no departure for the south until the land rush began at noon on Saturday, September 16th, 1893. For this reason the train's cow-catcher would move up to the starting line and await the signal like the rest of the conveyances gathered.

Clayton Fowler unloaded his Ranger gelding at the temporary platform rigged at Payne's Creek and, saddling the animal, mounted and rode down through the area. This whole district was not open, free range, but was actually the southern ends of a good many fertile Kansas farms.

Here, however, the farmers didn't mind the trespassing at all. The more enterprising of them considered it as manna from heaven. They found that the sudden arrival of thousands of boomers in their midst supplied a brisk local market for their produce, and they didn't have the expense of shipping it over the railroad to Kansas City or other markets. They were able to dispose of corn, oats and other cereals, and all the pigs and chickens they were inclined to slaughter.

Fowler watched these dealings with an amused glance. It was so different from the old market days back in Missouri, and in some of the small county seats he had visited east of the Mississippi.

The summer of 1893 had been a hot one, and even now the temperature was close to one hundred degrees in the shade, and no shade. The wind was almost consistently from the south, and it brought along waves of heat that seared everything from the plains of Texas to the Canadian border and beyond.

Fowler studied all this as he rode along seeking the headquarters of the Army officer in command at that section of the line. Finally he spotted a cavalry guidon stuck in the ground before a pyramid tent.

In the rear of the tent, sheltered in a clump of willows that edged a wider section of Payne's Creek, there were sleek cavalry animals cooling themselves in the shade. Beside the guidon there was an American flag. Because of the heat, the sides of the tent were rolled up, and it was possible for Fowler to see the several cots, the camp table and the stools that were the furnishings of the place.

The Missouri scout swung down from his horse some distance away, in order not to kick any more dust into the office. There was already a covering of grit that rolled with each stride of the soldiers on the board flooring.

Fowler cuffed back the brim of his battered campaign hat and strolled up to the tent. Ranger was ground-hitched and would remain standing until his master returned.

A smooth-jawed young cavalry officer looked up from his papers as Fowler's shadow darkened the opening. On his shoulders were the insignia of a captain. From force of habit, Clay's hand came up in a salute, and the blue-coated officer smiled as he returned the greeting.

"I'm Clay Fowler, sir," the Missouri lad declared.

The officer's brows knitted; then he stood up and offered his hand in greeting.

"Glad to know you, Fowler," he said. "We heard you'd be riding through, and I've had the boys sort of keeping an eye out for you. No one has reported in yet; how do you account for that?"

Fowler shrugged. "Maybe it's because I've been favoring old Ranger out there. I didn't ride him in, I came down on the train. Just unloaded up the tracks a bit."

"Glad you're here, Fowler, glad you're here," the captain told him, and there was definite relief in his voice. "I'm Captain Fred Larson, USA, and this is Lieutenant Paul Norton."

Fowler acknowledged the greeting and studied the two men. Larson was about thirty, and his face wore the mark of years on the frontier. He had black hair, clipped short, which curled out from under the edge of his hat when he wore it. Now the hat was on the spike knocked into the ridge pole of the tent.

When he arose to shake hands, Fowler saw that he was tall and thin, and in hip length riding boots, he looked something like a skeleton in uniform. But this was something in his favor. For Fowler knew that Captain Fred Larson had been tortured by the Indians, and come close to death, but his stoicism had so impressed the Red Men that they now considered him a brother. This was partly responsible for his skill and success with the famous Cherokee Scouts.

Lieutenant Paul Norton was almost the exact opposite of his superior. Norton was only a few years over twenty, and was of medium height and build. He appeared to be fresh out of West

Point, and hankering for a bit of excitement on the frontier. Buffalo Bill Cody was obviously Norton's hero in the West, for the young lieutenant affected the type of haircut that Cody had made famous.

"Anything stirring around here?" Fowler asked casually.

Norton turned back to his paper work, but Captain Larson joined Fowler in the flap of the tent, and pointed about a quarter of a mile away to where a big tent, reminiscent of the traveling circus tents or medicine shows, was erected on the parched prairie.

"That's Comanche Carter's place. You can see from the way folks are going in and out of the resort that business is really booming. A good many of the pioneers who have come out here are carrying all they own, and the booming of the cannon next Saturday will mark the beginning of their great adventure, yet they're willing to gamble and drink away their substance in a place like that. I don't understand it."

Clay Fowler nodded.

"Maybe I ought to go down there and look things over. I'm interested in keeping an eye on a fellow named Pug Bates."

"Pug Bates?" Captain Larson studied the Missouri man for some moments, then asked: "Where did you run into him?"

Fowler told him about the brush on the train. Larson's fingers went to the butt of the Dragoon pistol he wore in the black holster, and he remarked:

"That's bad. Bates is the worst of a bad lot. I'll be delighted if we get this business under way before we have too much violence along here. Norton and his boys are doing a good job, and there are several troops east and west of us, but there's going to be trouble—big trouble."

Fowler realized what the responsibility meant to a conscientious man like Fred Larson. He patted him on the shoulder and said:

"I'll try to scotch some of it, Larson. Count on me."

But Fowler didn't immediately head for the tent saloon. He went back to where Ranger's reins were dragging in the dust and led the animal northward toward the clump of willows where the spare cavalry mounts were taking their ease. They whinnied a welcome to the big gray gelding and Ranger replied in kind.

Ranger muzzled in the cool clear water of a back wash, and Fowler drank his fill at well. Then, patting the horse on its cool muzzle, he eased his gun belts on his hips and strode back toward the dirt trail that ran a winding path among the various small camps.

"Boy," Fowler said, "this heat must be hard on some of them women and children." He studied the wan faces of some of the youngsters and their parents; then his glance moved north of the creek. Beyond the black dirt areas that marked the edge of the camping grounds of the boomers, there were the cultivated farms and the tree-sheltered homes of Kansas. Each one of these experienced farmers had built himself a small wind break, and these had now grown into tall sheltering havens of green and brown.

South of Payne's Creek and leading off into the distance where these boomers would make their historic run, there was nothing but untouched prairie. It looked like some grim desert, uninviting, defiant, foreboding. There was not a tree nor a house anywhere in sight. Even the peaked tepees of the Cherokees no longer broke up the monotony of the prairieland. There was nothing but the parched grass of a dry September moving away in billowing waves as far to the east, west and south as the eye could reach.

The people about to take part in the land rush were all attracted by the rich land to the south, which was worth twenty dollars an acre, and waiting for them at a dollar and a half. The crack of the rifles of the soldiers stationed out in front would give them the signal on the historic noon.

All of the land in the Cherokee Outlet had been surveyed, and there were four small holes at the corners of each mile. Alongside these, at regular intervals, there were small mounds each with its notched stone, bearing the identification numbers.

Between the mile markers there were the half mile marks, pointing north, east, west or south, to show the boomer the direction of the mile corner where he was supposed to place a small flag marked with his name and number. This flag stake was to notify all late comers that the quarter section was already taken.

These thoughts were running through Fowler's mind as he finally turned his long-legged steps in the direction of Comanche Carter's resort.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when Clay drew up in front of the Carter tent. Horses were tied in front of the structure to an improvised hitch rail. Wagons and buggies were in the alleys on either side. There were long stakes at each corner and at intervals along the front and two sides, to let light into the interior while the sun was still riding the sky.

This open-work type of construction also made it possible for passers-by on the Payne Creek trail to see what was going on indoors. There were a number of rickety tables, with chairs about them, and a bar that was made of boards placed across upturned barrels. There wasn't anything very dignified or elegant about the appearance of the place, but no one minded this. At the rear end of the building was a cook tent, from which savory odors were coming.

These aromas were inviting to the inner man, and Fowler realized that he hadn't had a good meal since boarding the train at Coffeyville, Kansas the day before.

He moved down the aisle left between the bar and the tables, and found himself a seat toward the rear of the big tent. He seated himself, cuffed his sombrero to the back of his head, and rested his elbows on the edge of the table. A waiter came over to him and took his order.

Fowler's eyes roamed around the room. He didn't expect to recognize many of the people here, but he did want to be on his guard if anyone who was in the room should prove hostile. Bates might have set the good word going.

In a little room, made of three pieces of canvas siding, Fowler spied the familiar frame of Comanche Carter. Carter was a big man in every sense of the word. He was a flashy dresser, and always attracted attention wherever he went. His most prominent accessory was a big gold watch which was attached to a heavy-linked chain extending across his vest front. Clay Fowler knew, too, that at the opposite end of the chain there was a handsomely chased gold-mounted derringer.

"The old boy's looking all right," Fowler muttered as the waiter put down a plate of steaming victuals.

Comanche Carter had been a colorful figure on the frontier for many years. There were two schools of thought as to the way in which he had come by his name. One group claimed that he was a trader who did business with the Comanche Indians, and encouraged them to steal beef steers from the Texans when they were running big cattle herds northward to be sold at the railroad towns in Kansas.

Others insisted that Comanche Carter had earned his right to the name as a token of respect in Washington, because of his work in settling the Indian problems in the Territory, and making it possible for the Indian lands to be opened for white settlement.

Naturally, since all of the people gathered along Payne's Creek were interested in the bright future the land opening was to provide for them, any indication that Carter had made this possible was enough to make them friends of his for life.

Clay Fowler's eyes turned from his study of Carter to the more immediate job of surrounding the helping of chuck that had been placed before him. He was well along on his eating when he was aware of a man approaching him. Looking up at the fellow, he forked a piece of meat into his mouth, then began chewing carefully.

A mug of beer washed down the food, and at the same time, the fellow dropped into a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"Welcome to town, stranger," the newcomer declared. "I'm Buck McGann. You look as though you could take care of yourself, and I'd like to know more about you."

Clay Fowler studied McGann for several moments, then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said:

"Sometimes that's a plumb dangerous business. Especially in this country. A man don't have a hankering to ask too many questions."

Buck McGann didn't take any offense at this. On the contrary it appeared to give him new respect for Fowler, and he said:

"I can see that you're a cagey hombre. That's the kind of fellow who can really make his fortune out here in this Indian country. Maybe you'd like to listen to a proposition."

Fowler pricked up his ears. He might be able to get some information from McGann that would help Captain Larson in his handling of the boomers, and might guarantee them a real chance to settle on their own land. His eyes roamed over McGann, who was the typical frontier gambler type. McGann's black, flat-topped hat was on the edge of the table, and it matched his black frock coat, and the dark trousers that went down into polished riding boots. He wore a white ruffled shirt and a string tie.

"What's your proposition?" Fowler asked calmly, lowering his voice as though he didn't want any of those surrounding him to hear the conversation.

McGann reached into the inside pocket of his frock coat and brought out a heavy wallet. He flipped the corner of it so that Fowler could see a number of bills of large denominations.

"You're going into this Outlet, come Saturday noon," McGann declared. "You'll pick out a piece of ground that'll cost you something like two hundred and forty dollars to file on it, and you'll have a piece of land worth more than three thousand dollars."

All of this was quite true. With land worth twenty dollars an acre, a quarter section would be worth thirty-two hundred dollars to anyone who could file on it and complete the necessary formalities. The fees for one hundred and sixty acres would amount to only a dollar and a half an acre.

"That's a clear picture," Fowler agreed. "But what's your deal?"

"Waddy," McGann said calmly, "I've got a thousand dollars in dinero here that's yours, if you'll give me an option on your quarter section before you move in. We'll take care of the proving up, and you can move on to a greener pasture." There was a smile on the gambler's face, as though this excellent offer could not be ignored.

Fowler shook his head slowly.

"I'm taking up in the Outlet because I want to establish myself. I've been drifting around the country a lot, and it's about time I settled down. There isn't going to be much more good land open out here in the West. I figure I ought to take hold of a grant while it's handy."

Buck McGann shrugged. He was a suave and diplomatic fellow, and if he had other irons in the fire that might influence a less canny trader than Clay Fowler, he didn't try to bring them out at once. Instead he said:

"Mister, you're bucking a stacked deck. All of the choice land in the Outlet is already bid for. I'm not in this by myself. I'm representing a syndicate that has already sent hundreds of sooners into the Outlet to anticipate the regular run of the fellows outside the door here. They're on the job now to mark up the well-watered and well-grassed areas. You know what else will be left. It'll be marginal land that isn't worth twenty-five cents an acre."

The Missouri man studied McGann for some moments, then said:

"Even so, Mister, your thousand-dollar offer wouldn't be any great shakes. That would give you a sixty-six and two thirds percent profit on my riding. Make it two thousand dollars and I may consider it."

Buck McGann stopped his fingering of the money in the wallet, he looked at Fowler with a keen glance and finally said:

"Some folks who figure they'll cash in a couple of thousand dollars in gold are likely to settle for five cents worth of lead."

Then he pushed back his chair and rose. Fowler stood up too, and came around the table with the lithe glide of a panther. He took McGann by the shoulder, conscious of glances of interest from several other tables. Nevertheless he swung the gambler around and said:

"Mr. McGann, I don't take kindly to threats. If you're mixed up in any slimy business around here, it'll be you who ought to look out for yourself. The Government is looking after things here in the Outlet, and while it may be a little slow getting word of you sidewinders, it has a way of scotching rattlesnakes when the news does reach Washington."

"Good day, Mr. Fowler," McGann replied

calmly. He shrugged Fowler's hand from his shoulder, brushed off the black frock coat as though it were contaminated and threaded his way through the tables.

CHAPTER 3

Clay Fowler returned to his meal as though the brush with Buck McGann were of small importance. He finished the food on the big plate, drank down his beer, then signalled the hovering waiter and ordered a big wedge of apple pie and a cup of steaming black coffee.

The Missouri man leaned back when he had completed his meal, and his eyes again roved over the occupants of the tent saloon and restaurant. He was weighing McGann's words. He saw the gambler moving about the tent and apparently making the same sort of an offer to others of the boomers.

"Captain Larson ought to know about this," Fowler commented, "if he doesn't know about it already. I've heard that they've been pretty careful about checking on the sooners in the Territory and the Outlet. If the soldiers don't get them, we can pretty well count on the Cherokee Scouts to round them up. But I'll head down to the captain's tent and tell him of my experience."

Fowler climbed to his feet, set his guns on his thighs and loosened the weapons against drag. McGann looked up from a table near the far flap of the tent, but when Fowler glanced in his direction, the black-clad man turned back to his business of the moment.

The Missouri man's glance was also alert for sight of Pug Bates, for he realized that this would probably be the gathering place of the malcontents in the area.

He was about halfway across the room, when suddenly he spied a distinguished-looking man seated at a table just inside the front door flap. Fowler settled himself in a chair at the next table.

As Clay seated himself to study the drama before him, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, and saw that Buck McGann was coming over.

The subject of Fowler's attention was a middle-aged man with a Vandyke beard and long gray hair dropping down over his ears. His face held the reddish hue of an outdoor man, and his language was that of a Kentucky bred and educated man.

Apparently the Kentuckian had imbibed too much of his favorite Bourbon, or perhaps the hirelings at Comanche Carter's resort had deliberately doctored the man's drinks.

Several of the men at the table were talking crisply to the Kentucky colonel, and one of them was waving a printed form in front of the man's bleary eyes. Fowler recognized it as the option form that McGann had shown him only a short time before.

Clay Fowler watched as Buck McGann pushed past him and settled himself at the table.

"What's going on here?" McGann asked in a booming voice.

The burly fellow with the option paper gestured toward a well-filled wallet the Kentuckian was holding and said:

"This julep-drinking hombre is trying to pull a fast one on us. I talked to him about the option deal. He's going in with his wife and daughter. That means that they're entitled to three quarter sections. I'm offering him three thousand dollars, and he takes the money. Now he won't give us the signed option papers."

McGann studied the other men around the table, as though making sure that he was on firm ground. Then he said:

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! I'm sure this is all due to a misunderstanding. I've always heard that Colonel Forsythe Neale was a man of his word. Isn't that so, Colonel?"

The Kentucky colonel turned around, his bloodshot eyes apparently searching for the smooth tongued McGann, who sounded like the proverbial friend in need.

Clay Fowler watched the exchange with some interest. Back over his shoulder he saw that the canvas partition in front of the office of Comanche Carter had been drawn aside, and the frontier character was watching the doings with some interest.

"Thank you for your intervention, Mr. McGann," Neale said pompously. "You have made the proper interpretation of things that are going on here. This blackguard did make me the offer he mentions, but he never paid me a single dollar of the sum agreed upon. That is a bald-faced lie, and something we would not condone from a gentleman in my home state."

Colonel Neale's words were sober enough, but he did not realize that he was a long way from the bluegrass of Louisville and Lexington. As he turned to look at McGann, the fellow who had been baiting him leaped to his feet and pushed Neale backward from the flimsy camp chair.

"No spade-bearded horse-chaser is going to call me a liar and get away with it," shouted the slicker.

Things exploded much more rapidly than Clay Fowler or anyone else had expected. Men of McGann's stripe seldom resorted to gunplay, preferring to let their glib tongues talk them out of the situations into which their trickery frequently led them. If gunplay was the order of the day, it was usually much less obvious than this present assault.

Fowler lunged up on his feet, and his right-hand gun came up with a darting movement. There was a burst of gunfire in the room, and Colonel Forsythe Neale slumped forward over the glass-filled table, his right hand coming up to staunch the flow of blood from his shattered chest.

Buck McGann and several of his henchmen drew back as the pistols banged. Fowler was braced on his long legs; his second gun was now in its place in his left hand, and the twin muzzles, one of them wisping smoke, moved leisurely to cover all those about the table.

"What are you butting in here for?" McGann roared at Fowler.

"Now look what you've done, murdered a respectable man like Colonel Neale. You'll be strung up for this."

Fowler's eyes widened. The gall of the man before him was almost too much, and he said:

"You know as well as I do that it was your trigger-happy friend who gunned down Neale."

McGann turned slowly then, and glanced toward the chair where his partner had been sitting. The man's gun was on the table, amidst the shards of the broken beer mugs, and his arm was extended before him in a rigid position.

Fowler walked over to the fellow, pulled back his head with the lock of hair that fell down over his forehead, and pointed to the blue-black hole in the middle of the man's forehead.

"That's my mark," Fowler said crisply. "I don't gun down a man unless he deserves it. Your plug ugly pulled his last trigger."

Ignoring any possible threat from those about him, Clay Fowler holstered his guns, knelt beside the cooling body of Colonel Forsythe Neale, and began straightening out the man's limbs. His fingers went over the coat the man wore, searching for the wallet he had been holding in his hand when the shooting started. It was nowhere about.

His final service to the dead Kentuckian completed, Fowler rose slowly to his feet, and studied McGann and the men about him.

"That wallet and the money in it belongs to Colonel Neale," he said coldly. "I'll want to turn it over to his folks. You mentioned that he was going into the Outlet with a wife and daughter. Now that you have taken their breadwinner from them, the money he had with him will serve as a small consolation for their loved one. I want the man who stole that wallet to produce it right away."

Passive expressions marked the faces of McGann and the other men about him. Fowler was studying each one of them with a grim glance when there was an unexpected interruption. The tall, flashily dressed figure of Comanche Carter pushed into the group. Carter was twirling the gold watch chain and running his darting, snake-like eyes over the gathering about the table.

"What's the ruckus?" he demanded.

Buck McGann got out the first word, and Fowler realized that he was at a temporary disadvantage.

"Wes Gillen was closing a deal with Colonel Neale when this Missouri slewfoot elbowed in. There was a shooting. The colonel is dead, and so is Wes."

Comanche Carter turned to Fowler and asked:

"What's your story?"

"McGann has given you the facts," Fowler declared, "but they're a mite twisted. He didn't tell you that Wes Gillen's deal consisted of trying to rob Colonel Neale of his money. He didn't tell you that I elbowed in only after Gillen shot Neale without provocation. I doubt whether the colonel is even carrying a gun. McGann also forgot to mention that some one of his border jumpers took the colonel's wallet and the money in it. I'm asking the maverick to come up with it on this table right now, or there'll be more shooting. I reckon Buck McGann would look a heap unhealthy with something ventilating his brisket."

Comanche Carter sniffed. Buck McGann's face lost something of its ruddy glow. The other men about the table shuffled their feet from nervousness. They could all see the blood-rimmed spot in Wes Gillen's forehead, and they had seen just how it had come there.

Finally Carter sniffed again, and said:

"This whole ruckus is bad for business. I've only got a few days more to clean up here; then my customers will be skallyhooting all over the Oklahoma Territory. How much you reckon this Colonel Neale hombre was toting in his leather?"

"Mrs. Neale will probably know," Fowler said. "I'll let you know after I check with her. You figure on paying up?"

"Sure thing," Carter replied suavely. A smile of satisfaction crossed McGann's face. Clayton Fowler saw relief in the expression of the other men.

"I'll be back to collect later," Fowler agreed. "In the meantime, if I were you, I'd be doing two things. First off, I'd see that McGann and his fighting roosters didn't slicker any more of my customers. Then I'd look after Colonel Neale's body and see that it was in decent shape for burial. Otherwise I figure there are some people who ain't going to have a very good opinion of Comanche Carter!"

Carter bristled and his cheeks puffed out, but Fowler ignored his anger, turned on his heel and strode from the saloon tent.

CHAPTER 4

Clayton Fowler found little difficulty in locating the camp of the Neales, but as he drew near the stopping place of the Kentucky colonel, on the north bank of Payne's Creek, and about half a mile west of Carter's saloon, his ability to handle the situation appeared to ebb. Fowler had never been one for the ladies, especially where young ladies were involved.

Nevertheless he realized that the job was one that would have to be done, and there had been very few people in the Carter emporium at the time of the killing who could have assisted the women.

Fowler strolled around the Neale camp for several moments. He saw that the colonel was a rather wealthy man. His picket line showed twenty-four blooded Kentucky thoroughbreds, and apparently Neale had been planning on using them as the basis for a stock farm in the Cherokee Outlet.

There were two wagons in the camp, and both of these appeared to be rather new and sturdy. They were both Studebakers, and looked as though they had come down to Saint Louis on the river boats, and from there had been brought a good part of the way overland by flatcar. Apparently Colonel Neale was anxious to start anew with all the latest modern equipment.

One of the wagons had been rigged up as a home for the women folks, with such modern gadgets as a sewing machine. This would serve until they were in the more sumptuous surroundings of their new home in the Indian Territory.

The other wagon was typically a man's, and had everything to gladden the heart of a fellow such as Forsythe Neale appeared to have been.

After his survey of the camp, Fowler noticed that the two women had the evening meal completed, and were looking down the rough trail in the direction of Carter's place, as though wondering what was delaying the colonel.

Neale's wife was a matronly-looking woman on the buxom side, wearing neat, home-tailored clothing, and with a capable expression on her firmly molded features. His daughter was a junior edition of the mother, but with the lissome figure of a girl who has known an outdoor life for most of her growing years. Her hair was titian, and was combed over her ears and caught up in a bun on the back of her neck.

Fowler finally gathered up his courage and walked into the camp area. Mrs. Neale looked up at him with an inviting smile, and Fowler said:

"Is this the Neale camp?"

"That's right," Mrs. Neale replied pleasantly. "Can I help you?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," Fowler said abruptly, not knowing just how to dissemble at a time like this.

The young girl hastened over to her mother, just as though she sensed that something had happened to her father. Clay swept off his sombrero, rolled it up in his hands; then the girl asked:

"Is it about Father?"

"Yes," Fowler replied soberly, "yes, it is."

"What is it?" the girl demanded.

"Colonel Neale is dead, Miss," Fowler told her with all the sympathy he could put into his voice. "I done my best for him, but I don't reckon it was enough."

"Dead?" Mrs. Neale repeated the word in a dull voice, then settled down on a folding camp stool. Her daughter knelt beside her and offered the older woman some cool water from a dipper. Then, with pleading eyes, the girl looked up at Fowler. The Missouri man didn't know just what to do next. He realized now that these people didn't know who he was, so he explained:

"I'm Clayton Fowler. I happened to be in Carter's place when someone started a fight with your father. Fellow by the name of Wesley Gillen. He claimed your father was cheating him out of three thousand dollars."

"Father never cheated anyone out of anything!" the girl insisted emphatically.

"I believe you, Miss——" Fowler hesitated.

"Marion Neale," the girl supplied. "My mother is Mrs. Ellen Neale. We're so glad you came to tell us about it."

Fowler looked around the camp, then asked: "Do you have a brother, Miss Neale, or any other man traveling with you?"

"No one," the girl told him. "Why?"

"I'd like to relieve you of the burden of the funeral arrangements," Fowler explained.

Apparently this necessity hadn't occurred to either the girl or her mother. They both broke into sobs at the prospect. Fowler believed that they would want to be alone in their grief for a while at least, so he said: "I'll have to report this to Captain Larson now, so if you don't mind, I'll stop back later in the evening. Perhaps then you and your mother will have a clearer idea of what you'll be wanting to do."

"Thank you," Marion Neale said, offering her smooth hand to him in farewell. Clay Fowler took it, turned and hurried away.

Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton were at evening mess. One of the enlisted troopers was cooking up a mulligan stew for them, and they invited Clay Fowler to come and join them.

"What do you think of our section of the great Republic of the United States?" asked the captain, in an attempt at lightness.

"I don't think very much of it," Fowler said frankly.

Captain Larson held a spoon halfway to his mouth, studied the former Indian scout, and asked:

"What did you run into?"

"One of the most cold-blooded murders I've ever seen," Fowler told him. "Did you know Colonel Forsythe Neale?"

"The old Kentucky boy, who thinks Lee was the greatest general of our times, and no one knows anything about cavalry but Jeb Stuart?"

"That's the fellow," Fowler agreed.

Norton caught the thread of the discussion, and there was a look of surprise on his face as he asked:

"Who did he murder?"

"He?" Fowler was amazed. "He was murdered! Shot down in cold blood in Carter's place, while a fellow named Wes Gillen was trying to bilk him out of three thousand dollars."

"What happened to Gillen?"

"He'll be planted in Boot Hill in the morning," Fowler said calmly. "But that doesn't take care of Neale's family."

There was a sober trio around the mulligan pot for the next twenty minutes as the three men consumed their supper. Then the plates were carried away, and Fowler said:

"Did you know that there was a land syndicate operating in this group here, buying up options on property still to be homesteaded, and paying up to a thousand dollars for a quarter section?"

"How do they work that?" Larson asked.

Fowler explained the deal that Buck McGann had offered him, and told how a similar offer was apparently being made to Colonel Neale at the time of the shooting.

"What happened when you turned down McGann?" Larson inquired.

"I didn't exactly turn him down," Fowler declared. "I told him the ante wasn't high enough. Told him I thought he ought to pay as much as two thousand dollars if he wanted one hundred and sixty acres of good prairie land."

"That's one way to talk to him," Captain Larson agreed. "What was his answer to that?"

"He told me that I wouldn't be able to spend two thousand dollars in gold if I was paid off in five cents worth of lead."

"A few threats of that kind will turn a lot of people against them, and their crooked deals will be bound to fall through," Larson pointed out.

"Maybe so," agreed Fowler, "but McGann boasted that they already had sooners out in the Outlet country, and they were preëmpting the best watered and best grassed land along the river bottoms and creek beds. What about that?"

Captain Fred Larson chuckled at this information. Then he turned to Lieutenant Norton and said:

"Let Fowler look at the new orders that have come through from Washington. This ought to take care of fellows like McGann and his crowd."

Norton turned to a folding desk behind his camp chair and brought out an official-looking document with a Government seal stamped on it. This he passed to the Indian scout, and Fowler read:

> "It has come to our attention that a good many land sharks are moving into the Cherokee Outlet in advance of the official opening date of September 16th, 1893. In order to make it impossible for these men to capitalize upon their claim-jumping, you are instructed

to register all land claimants before the start of the run, and to have notaries supply them with sealed certificates. Notaries will be posted all along the line to deliver the certificates."

Clayton Fowler read this carefully, then returned it to the Army officer.

"That ought to fix some of the wise boys," Fowler agreed. "But it's still not going to mean very much to the Neales, with no man to make the run for them."

Young Paul Norton's eyes beamed with laughter and he said:

"Marion Neale isn't a bad-looking girl. Maybe you'd like to make the run for her."

Fowler knew that his face was flushing at the suggestion. At the same time the idea was not entirely repugnant to him. He didn't want the two Army officers to see how seriously he was considering it, however, so he replied:

"You men know the sort of job that has brought me out here. I'm afraid it is a lot more important than the welfare of one young girl and her mother. If it weren't for that, I might accept your challenge."

Paul Norton sobered almost immediately, and said:

"We'll keep an eye out for the Neales. The cavalry is pitifully shorthanded for the job that has been given to it, but we'll do our best to see that the decent people get an even break."

Clayton Fowler bade farewell to the soldiers, planning to see them later in the evening, or next morning, the morning of Friday, September 15th, the day before the historic rush.

Fowler's steps took him back to Carter's place, and when he strolled into the big tent, it was to find the emporium illuminated with hanging oil lamps, rigged to the double upright and ridge poles. The area was filled with smoke from hundreds of cigarettes.

The tables that had shown a scattering of men during the afternoon hours were now black with people, and the click of chips and the rattle of coins echoed throughout. Fowler stood in the flap doorway for several moments. He studied the gathering of people, but saw no one he recognized. Apparently Buck McGann and his hirelings had changed their base of operations, at least for the evening.

Clay Fowler moved down the aisle behind the men who were lined up at the bar two and three deep, until he found himself at the entrance to Carter's office. He rapped on the small upright pole carrying the partition canvas, and waited until the smiling, beefy face of Comanche Carter appeared at the opening.

"Hello, Fowler," the proprietor greeted him. He had a cigar in his red-lipped mouth, and his right hand was fumbling with the heavy gold chain across his waistcoat. "Come in and have a seat."

Clay Fowler was immediately on the alert. He didn't know whether Comanche Carter was the affable gent he appeared to be, or whether he was leading Fowler into a trap.

Once behind the canvas partition, the Missouri man saw that Carter's office contained a desk with a swivel chair behind it, and three other substantial seats scattered around. The floor was of dirt, hardened down by the hammer of mauls, and the tramp of feet during the month that the boomers had been gathering.

Fowler seated himself in one of the chairs so that his back was against a pole, and his eyes were trained on the entrance from the drinking and gaming rooms.

Carter settled down in the swivel chair, appearing to ignore Fowler's obvious precautions, shifted his cigar in his mouth, and fumbled among some papers on his desk. He picked up a leather wallet which Fowler immediately recognized as the one he had seen in Colonel Neale's hand at the beginning of the argument.

"Here's the wallet you were interested in," Carter said suavely. "It was down in the saw-dust under the table. There is quite a sizable sum of money in it, and the usual business papers. I'm sure you'll find, after checking with the Neales, that everything is in order."

Clayton Fowler accepted the wallet and put it inside his shirt. Then, as he started to go, Carter said:

"You don't have to rush off, do you? I've got something I'd like to talk over with you."

"What is that?" Fowler asked with some interest. He realized that if Comanche Carter was not actually one of the leaders of the tougher element on the fringes of the Cherokee Outlet and in the Indian Territory, he might well be in the confidence of these leaders.

"You look like a capable fellow," Carter said crisply. "I watched you as you handled that situation this afternoon. You knew what to do and you certainly did it. It was too bad that you happened to be at the next table when the fireworks opened up, or you might have saved Neale's life."

"I'm sorry I missed out there, too," Fowler agreed, then hesitated as the other man went on.

"Right after this land rush is over, I'm going to move down into the Outlet to Enid or one of the other towns that will spring up along the Kansas and Texas Railroad, and I'll be needing a capable man like you to sort of ramrod things while I'm not around. A place gets a bad reputation when there's too much gunplay connected with it."

Being a bouncer in a frontier saloon was hardly the type of job that appealed to Clayton Fowler, but there might be times when such a job might supply access to wanted men, or otherwise aid Fowler in his work.

"I hadn't thought of doing just that," Fowler declared. "But I might think it over, and tell you my reaction when you've moved down to Enid. That'll be time enough, won't it?"

Comanche Carter weighed the matter through a cloud of cigar smoke before replying:

"I'd like to know before leaving Payne's Creek, of course, because if you're not going to take me up, I'd like to make other arrangements. But I'm willing to meet a good man more than halfway. Look me up when you get to Enid."

Clayton Fowler thanked Carter, rose, and with a salute to the brim of his battered felt hat, turned and left the office.

CHAPTER 5

Clayton Fowler's next stop for the evening was the Neale place. This time he did not go the roundabout way, but now that he was able to return the colonel's papers and money to the mother and daughter, headed directly toward the spot where the hanging lanterns in the rear of the two wagons marked the Neale camp.

As he approached, he heard hammering and sawing going on, and for some moments he was curious as to what was going forward. Then he dismissed the thought from his mind as Marion Neale looked up at him and said:

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Fowler."

Mrs. Neale echoed the greeting, and Fowler saw that the women were working on black garments that would be their mourning weeds for the funeral of their dead husband and father.

The Missouri man took out the wallet and passed it to the girl.

"Your father lost this in Carter's place," Fowler said. "I went back and got it from Comanche Carter. I thought it would help you and your mother to have it. Will you check through it, and see if everything is in order?"

Marion Neale opened the leather wallet, her fumbling fingers went through the possessions that had so recently been an intimate part of her father's life, and, brushing back the tears, she said:

"Everything appears to be in order. And thanks again for bringing it to us."

Mrs. Neale studied Clayton Fowler for some moments; then the two women, realizing that in Fowler they had a kindred soul, started telling him of their hopes and ambitions when they had left Kentucky and come westward.

As Fowler listened to the narrative, he found that some of his earlier determination was weakening. The death of Colonel Forsythe Neale had undoubtedly brought an abrupt end to any possibility of complete happiness for Mrs. Ellen Neale, but Marion still had her whole life ahead of her, and she would make an excellent helpmeet for some man.

"Do you still plan to go through with the run?" Fowler asked the women.

"Of course," Mrs. Neale declared emphatically. "If Forsythe isn't with us, we'll feel that we're doing what he wanted to do as a sort of memorial to him."

Fowler could understand something of the spirit that moved pioneer women to buck all the dangers that Nature, untamed Indians and the renegade white men who roamed the West could put in their path. He wanted to do all he could to help the Neales.

"Do you have anyone to help you with your outfit?" Fowler inquired.

"Colonel Neale was making arrangements to take care of those matters," Mrs. Neale declared proudly. "He had several young boys who were coming along to help him. They were to remain here with the horses until we were settled; then the colonel planned to come back and join them here, and drive down with the horses."

"Now that the colonel is dead," Fowler began hesitantly, "perhaps I can take his place, in a manner of speaking, and see that you folks are properly settled on the land you plan to stake."

Marion Neale and her mother exchanged glances. There was a gleam in the eye of the younger woman. Then Fowler noticed that the hammering and sawing he had first heard were no longer audible. The explanation came a moment later when a tall, somber-looking man, having all the earmarks of a circuit-riding clergyman, came from beyond the wagons and joined the group in the lantern-light.

"Young man," he said, even before either of the women had an opportunity to introduce him, "I've heard your kind offer to the ladies, and I must say that on the part of our dear departed friend, Forsythe Neale, I certainly appreciate the fullness of heart that has prompted your generous Christian deed. Colonel Neale was a foresighted man, and he knew something of the dangers and rigors of this Western frontier, even though he did not discuss the coarser side of things with his womenfolks. Therefore, even as it has pleased God to take Forsythe from us, I have arrived in time to be the guiding light for his poor bereaved widow, and his charming, yet saddened daughter."

This was rather a long speech for any man to make in a country where taciturnity was one of the greatest virtues. But there was depth and sincerity in the words, and Fowler felt a weight lifting from his heart. It was a relief to know that the women would not be alone and unattended in that wild, barren land.

Fowler studied the other man for a while, then said:

"You have indeed arrived at a good time. I assume that the carpentering I have heard is a preparation for the last rites for our dear friend, Colonel Forsythe."

"That it is," agreed the clerical-looking gentleman. "I'm sorry that it has to be done so close to the womenfolk, but quarters in this vicinity are confined as you know, and we do not want to have to share our grief with too many of our neighbors. Lord knows, they have enough burdens of their own."

Clayton Fowler agreed. Then he strode toward the rear of the wagons with the man and said:

"I didn't get your name, friend. I only arrived this afternoon, and I haven't met many of the folks hereabouts."

"No offense, no offense," replied the fellow in the clipped style that was his usual way of talking. "I'm Lester Welch from down Ashland way, in Kentucky, you know. Some folks speak of me as Silver Dollar Welch, because I have a habit of paying my bills with the hard coin of the realm."

"That's a habit that may seem curious east of the Mississippi," Fowler said, "but you'll find plenty of folks doing that out here."

"Splendid, splendid," Welch declared. "It ought to make me feel right at home."

"Do you have any permanent plans for settlement out here?" Fowler asked Welch. "Will Colonel Neale's death influence them?"

"Not at all, not at all," Welch declared emphatically. "I signed a partnership agreement with the colonel to cover the raising of Kentucky blooded horses, and the development of a new strain. The colonel had an idea that if we mated some of his stallions with Indian mares we might be able to build up a strain that would be adapted to this rugged country out here. You probably know how the Indians were able to do wonders with wild Spanish stallions, and some of the Arabian mares left here three hundred years ago by Coronado and his men."

Silver Dollar Welch was so wound up on his subject that it was almost impossible to stop him. The middle-aged man went on at a great rate as they stood before the coffin he had been building, and Fowler helped him to line it with silks and wrappings that had been intended for a more pleasant addition to a frontier home.

"I'm sure Mrs. Neale and her daughter will be in excellent hands," Fowler finally said. "I wish you all the luck in the world."

He took his leave of the garrulous Welch and headed back between the wagons, planning to say good night to the Neale women. The spot at the foot of the folding ladders giving access to the two wagons was empty. The chairs were folded and standing against one of the wheels.

Disappointed, Clay Fowler strode away up the trail. He had gone perhaps a hundred yards, moving through the sleeping lines of tents, wagons and improvised camps, when he heard hurrying footsteps behind him, then a husky whisper:

"Mister Fowler!"

Clay Fowler turned around, and then he felt a tug on his arm. He paused and saw that it was Marion Neale looking up at him in the darkness.

"Friends of mine call me Clay!" Fowler said calmly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

"All right—Clay," the girl conceded. "My name is Marion."

The warmth in the voice of the girl, and the vibrant feeling of her young body as she clung to him, made Clay more than willing to be led toward the edge of the creek, where they settled down upon a hummock of grass.

They were silent for some moments; then Marion said:

"You probably think I'm very bold, chasing after you like this."

"Not exactly," Fowler told her. "I'm sure you must have had a good reason for it. I'm positive that you're not the type of girl who would go chasing young men all over southern Kansas."

"I'm not," the girl replied testily. Then she laughed at her own crisp retort and went on: "I just wanted to tell you that Mother and I are really glad you helped us out; and we—I want you to come and see us when we're settled. You—you know your way around this frontier country, don't you?"

"I reckon," Fowler agreed with a laugh. "I've been roaming it for the past seven years from the Rio Grande to the Red River of the North, and from the Mississippi to the Raton Mountains and the Truckee Pass."

"Mister Welch was rather abrupt with you, at least I thought so. He almost talked as though he owned Mother and me, just because of his old partnership with Father. But it's not like that at all."

"I'm sure it isn't," Fowler agreed. "Yet I'm glad to hear it from your lips."

"We might have been beholden to him, if you hadn't brought back Father's money," the girl pointed out. "He offered to loan us the funds for setting up the ranch, and to take his money out of the return from the foals and colts. But that would leave us without ready money for five years or more. Now things will be much easier for us."

Clayton Fowler listened while the girl rambled on about their plans; then he asked:

"Won't your mother be worried about where you are?"

"I don't think so," Marion said calmly.

"Mother's a pretty discerning woman."

Fowler knew that there was some hidden meaning in the girl's words, but he was too new to the world of romance to know that his own fortune might be wrapped up in Marion's talk with him there at the edge of Payne's Creek.

"You'd better stay close to your wagons after the funeral tomorrow, Marion," Fowler advised. "Things will be at pretty much of a white heat tomorrow night. Everyone who is back in the rear of this bomber crowd will be jockeying to get up front for the beginning of the big run on Saturday morning."

Marion bent her head forward now until her chin was resting on Clay Fowler's breast.

"How are you planning to make the run?" he asked.

"Just about the way Father was going to make it," Marion replied firmly. "I'll take one of his Kentucky thoroughbreds, one of the horses I've lived with ever since the day it was foaled, so I'm sure I'll succeed."

Clayton Fowler weighed this idea for some moments, then said:

"If you don't think Mr. Welch will mind, I'll let you use my Ranger horse. I think you'll have much better luck with him than with one of the big Kentucky thoroughbreds."

"Bother Mister Welch," Marion said

harshly. "But why do you think your Ranger horse will be better than a Kentucky thoroughbred?"

"Your father isn't the only man who has staked his chances on fancy horses," Fowler pointed out. "All up and down the two hundred mile stretch of Kansas border opening into the Strip, there are hundreds of fine animals, but most of those fancy horses are bound to fail. They just don't understand the prairie. It will take a prairie-bred horse to hit up any speed while he's dodging the badger holes and the gopher mounds. Some of them will even find it hard to hit the bunch grass with a sure footing."

Marion was wise enough to see that there was a good deal of common sense in Fowler's explanation. But there was one other thing that was bothering her.

"If I take your Ranger horse, then how are you going to make the run?"

Clayton Fowler was a bit disturbed by that question. He didn't want to tell anyone the nature of the mission that had brought him to the Cherokee Outlet. Not even Marion Neale. His active mind sought for and found a logical explanation, and he said:

"Ranger isn't the only horse I have on my string. Any good cowboy or frontiersman usually has a remuda of eight to ten horses. I'm sure I can rustle up one of the other mounts who'll give me a run for my money. Besides, Ranger is the kind of horse who can do some of your thinking for you."

Marion tightened her hold on Fowler's arm, and agreed:

"I'll ride your Ranger horse, Missouri man. And I'll make a real home for Mother. But where will I return the horse, when we're in and settled?"

"You can look me up at the land office in Enid," Fowler told her, "if I don't get a chance to drop out your way and pick him up myself."

She squeezed his hand between her own, then turned and hurried away in the darkness.

Fowler watched her go as he sat there on the creek bank, listening to the click of her heels until they died out in the silence of the prairie night. He hoped that Ranger would be enough to guarantee the girl her chance at a new life; hoped that the blackguards who were stirring up trouble in the Indian country would abide by the custom of the West and not fight their wars against women.

The Missouri man knew that even some of the well-mounted strong men in the land rush wouldn't gain the land they desired. Speed would be only one factor in this peculiar race.

The consistent winners would be men like Buck McGann who rode good mounts, but also had plenty of gun bluff to chase off those who might have arrived at the choice spots ahead of them. The race might go to the swift, but the settlement of the land would probably go to the toughest of the range toughs assembled there.

With these thoughts in mind, Clay Fowler continued his stroll back toward the tent he would share with Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton. Somehow the warm winds that blew up from Texas had a new soothing quality in their zephyr caresses. The stars that shone above in the heavens were much brighter than usual.

The sickle moon that edged up over the horizon, as though frowning upon this human gathering, had a richness and ripeness that Fowler hadn't noticed before while riding his Ranger horse over the plains between the Arkansas and the Red, along the Cimarron and the Canadian.

Clay found himself whistling as he strolled along, and he was oblivious to the disturbance he was causing in the tents he passed.

CHAPTER 6

Things were stirring early the next morning in the camps along Payne's Creek. There was an undercurrent of excitement that ran the whole length of the two hundred mile starting line for the big rush into the Cherokee Outlet.

The more sober-minded of the boomers had heard about the murder of Colonel Forsythe Neale, and many of them had gone to pay their last respects to the old Kentucky colonel. Some of them wondered whether sudden death such as had come to Neale was the fate that was in store for them in the race for independence in the Indian Territory.

Others who had little time for reflection were forming in long queues before the tents occupied by the notaries who would supply the certificates indicating that the bearer had not left the Kansas border before the signal gun.

Clayton Fowler watched all of this activity with mixed feelings. He was talking to Captain Fred Larson, as the Army officer supervised the distribution of certificates to the group of people who were planning to go in on the Kansas and Texas Railroad train.

"Looks like some sections of country are damned by the Almighty before He ever opened them to settlement. No one who ever lived in the Cherokee Outlet ever had any luck out of it. How can these people hope, then, to carve a future?"

"You're being pretty fatalistic, aren't you?" Larson asked in a lighter vein.

"Not necessarily," Clayton Fowler said soberly. "Look at the name of the place, the Cherokee Outlet. It was supposed to give the Cherokees access to the great plains at the base of the Rockies; an outlet to freedom and a broader life such as they've never known. But has it worked out that way?"

"The Cherokees signed the treaty disposing of it," Larson pointed out. His was the typical attitude of many men who owed allegiance to the Government.

Fowler shrugged his shoulders, and remarked:

"At one time the Cherokees were the largest and most important native tribe in the Eastern United States. Their very name meant 'dwellers in the upland fields.' They got that name from their cultivation of the farming areas in the mountain regions of the Carolinas, Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama. Most people don't even know that. They think of the Cherokees as a tribe that grew up west of the Mississippi and throve there."

Like most cavalry officers, Captain Fred Larson had his own distorted ideas about the Indian problem, born largely out of the fact that he and his yellow-legs were constantly chasing mounted warriors who attacked isolated ranch houses.

"You don't expect the Government to keep open millions of square miles of virgin territory so the Indians can ride back and forth on horseback, dragging their squaws and papooses and dogs on their travois, do you?"

Clay Fowler shook his head slowly.

"Now you're not talking about the Cherokees at all," he insisted. "Even back in the East, the Cherokees lived in numerous permanent villages made up of substantial log houses. They were an agricultural people who raised large crops of pumpkins, corn and beans. Hernando De Soto found them living there in peace and prosperity early in the sixteenth century, and he wrote about them in the chronicles of his voyages. They have a tradition behind them."

Captain Larson had no desire to argue with the young Missouri scout. He realized that Fowler was a student of the red men, and was rather serious about his feelings. Fowler had had to be, in order to earn the respect and devotion of the red brethren which had stood him in good stead in the past seven years.

"I've heard something about the Cherokees," Larson finally broke in. "They got into trouble during the Revolutionary War. Which side did they fight on?"

"They favored the English," Fowler admitted, "but that doesn't mean anything. That was one hundred and fifteen years ago. They signed a treaty of peace with the United States in 1785, and when they were left alone, they worked out a civilization of their own that was far beyond anything the white people of the territories west of the Alleghanies knew at that time. By 1820 their prosperity and advancement were so great that they were spoken of as the Cherokee Nation."

Lieutenant Norton interrupted the discussion and reported:

"All of the folks who are planning to move southward on the train now have their entry certificates, Captain. Where do we go next?"

Captain Larson surveyed the groups around some of the other tent offices to the east and west, then said:

"The boys further along the line are being rushed. Perhaps you'd better take your notaries down and help them." Then he turned back to Fowler and said:

"You're not going to start telling me about George Guess, are you?"

"George Guess had a lot of things in his favor. Most people speak of him by his Indian name of Sequoyah, and his fame doesn't stop here in Oklahoma, but goes right on through to California. He not only gave the Cherokees the gift of his leadership, but made it possible for them to speak and deal with all races by his creation of the Cherokee alphabet and language."

The young cavalry captain was warming up to the discussion, and wanted to prod Fowler into giving him more information.

"If the Cherokees liked it so well in the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee and Alabama, why did they come to Oklahoma in the first place?"

This question always riled Fowler, as it did most right-thinking Americans. He was almost puffing up in red rage when he said:

"That's a question that an Army officer should never ask. It's something most of them prefer to forget about. Perhaps the soldiers were merely carrying out orders, but the orders were countermanded by no less an authority than the United States Supreme Court, though without avail."

Larson found himself caught off balance, and his lips went dry as he asked:

"How was that?"

"The greed of man," Fowler replied soberly. "Gold was discovered in the eastern mountain districts occupied by the Cherokees. White settlers wanted to move in and exploit it. Strong pressure was brought to bear on the Federal Government for the removal of the Indians. The United States Supreme Court upheld the autonomy of the Cherokee Nation, but when the State of Georgia moved in to take over, President Andrew Jackson refused to intervene. A small minority of the Indians, accepting the white man's largesse, sold out their powerful brethren, and agreed that the tribe would move beyond the Mississippi within three years."

Larson chuckled, and said:

"You've built up a pretty serious case against the State of Georgia, but I don't see where the Army comes into it."

"No?" remarked Fowler soberly. "Well, when the Cherokees refused to move in 1838, the Army moved into the mountains and drove thousands of the Indians, chiefly old people, women and children, on a March of Death that was one of the most hideous and horrible pilgrimages in human history. Had it not been for the hardihood and grim encouragement of their great leader Chief John Ross, they might never have survived."

Captain Larson cleared his throat, and was silent for several moments after this. Fowler asked:

"Have you ever been in Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma? If you go there, you'll see that they have a principal chief who corresponds to our president, and an elective Senate, House of Representatives, and a complete system of public schools."

Lieutenant Norton was back now, having disposed of the notaries, and was listening to Fowler's discourse with the interest of a newcomer to the frontier.

"They do have a government like ours?" he asked in amazement.

"Exactly," Fowler told him. "And you fellows may think that your yellow-legs are the pride of the frontier fighting forces, but you ask any warrior of the Cherokee Nation, and he'll tell you that the boys who run the frontier are the Cherokee Scouts."

Neither one of the cavalry officers was inclined to argue this point. On too many occasions they had met up with the strong men of the Cherokee tribe, mounted on their pinto ponies or riding sturdy cavalry mounts, and carrying with them bedrolls and complete camping equipment. Their uniforms were invariably less formal than the blue coat and trousers of the regular Army soldier, and correspondingly more picturesque.

Even now, two of the Scouts were visible, patrolling on the far side of the border, with their blanket rolls over their saddle pommels, quick firing rifles in a sling at the cantle, and colorful red-dyed Indian blankets across the saddle skirts.

They wore the campaign hat of the veteran cavalryman, but also displayed the feathers of their forebears, and the braided colorful trimmings that set off their long hair.

Fowler and his companions studied these Scouts as though they were living evidence of the validity of Fowler's arguments.

"Those Cherokees are probably watching these people gathered here along the border, and are wondering where they'll be three or four weeks from now. They've been all through this search for new homelands. They know the heartbreak, the hunger, the thirst, and the mad passions of men that are mixed up in the quest."

Captain Fred Larson nodded slowly.

"The reports are coming in from up and down the line," he said. "At the present time there are twice as many families waiting as there are farms. The early birds who have been here a month or more thought there was plenty of room. They visualized this opening of the Outlet as a parade of prairie schooners to happy new homes. But now they realize that they're in for a race. It's a sobering thought."

Clayton Fowler nodded, then lifted his capable-looking hand and began checking off a few important facts on his fingers.

"From what you say, right now a man's chances are one in two of getting a good place to live. But you, and they, are forgetting a lot of things."

"Such as?" Larson prompted.

"Well," Fowler pointed out, "four sections in each township of thirty-six, one claim in every nine, is reserved for educational and state purposes. That means that even though these men succeed in overcoming all the obstacles, and actually stake a legal claim, one man in every nine is going to find himself on reserved land. By the time he looks up his land numbers at the mile corner and discovers his mistake, his chance of getting a free claim is gone."

Lieutenant Norton, closer to the tenderfoot coming out to the prairie, voiced the feelings of a good many of the more sober-thinking when he remarked:

"This all looked swell when it was worked out on paper. But now when we change the map into real, rolling prairie land, and the wooden blocks become human beings with their hopes and longings, it just doesn't work out right."

"Right," agreed Fowler. "Right now, there's another human thing we ought to do. They'll be burying Colonel Neale in about half an hour. You're going down there, aren't you?"

Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton nodded. Then the three frontiersmen pushed through the milling groups of boomers who were going over their gear again, and checking and rechecking the things they were going to take into the Outlet the next morning.

There was a somber air about the Neale camp. Its focal point was a typical prairie schooner, with the tables set up alongside the two wagons, and the pots and pans neatly stacked alongside the open fires. Two carpenter's horses, draped with blankets, were the bier, and on top of these there stood the rough board coffin Silver Dollar Welch had knocked together the previous evening.

Mrs. Neale and her daughter were in dark clothing, the rusty garments they had been sewing while Clay Fowler visited with them. They looked up as the young Missouri man and the two cavalry officers approached.

Marion hurried forward and greeted them. She held onto Fowler's arm and whispered:

"Thanks for coming, thanks very much!"

Fowler patted her hand, and knew that he was imparting a certain strength to her. Lester Welch bustled up then. He looked more like a circuit-riding preacher than ever now. Somewhere he had dug up a stove pipe hat that was reminiscent of the Abraham Lincoln of the Springfield law book days. A black-bordered handkerchief hung from beneath the tail of his long mourning coat.

"Welcome, gentlemen," Welch said. "I speak in the name of my poor departed partner, Colonel Forsythe Neale. "It's a pleasure to see you here; would that the occasion were not so sorrowful."

These preliminaries completed, Fowler now discovered that a number of the other pioneers were gathered in a half-circle running from the rude trail across the southern edge of the pastureland down to the edge of Payne's Creek.

In the absence of a regular clergyman, a young divinity student who had plans for a church in the Outlet took over the task of consigning the mortal remains of Colonel Forsythe Neale to the unkind soil of southern Kansas, and his immortal soul to the more receptive realm beyond the gates of Heaven.

Mumbled prayers filled the silence of the early afternoon, and moving lips repeated the responses. Then the crude casket was carried to a grave in the shelter of the willows.

Marion Neale followed the coffin with her mother, while Lester Welch supported her with a firm hand. On the way back to the wagons, however, Marion evaded the brotherly attention of Silver Dollar long enough to seek out Clayton Fowler and the soldier, and said:

"I've spoken to Mother about making the ride on your Ranger horse. She seems to think it would be all right. But she wants to ask Mr. Welch's opinion before she agrees to it."

Jealousy stirred within Fowler's breast, and he looked at the gangly fellow who had become such an important influence in the life of the girl he admired.

"Mr. Welch ought to be delighted," Fowler replied soberly, "if he's going to use the partner scheme most of the other racers are going to use."

Marion Neale's face wore a puzzled frown. "What's that?" she asked.

"Well," Fowler explained, "I'll give you a picture of how this thing is supposed to be run. When the signal gun goes off, the average boomer out there is going to start out on his wise little prairie mustang or Indian pony, if he has good sound common sense. Otherwise he'll be riding anything from a high-wheeled bicycle to a horse and buggy, or even one of your ponderous old prairie schooners. But he won't be going alone."

"Why not?" the girl inquired.

"Because if he's smart, he'll want to have someone with him who can swear as to the time he stakes his claim. Each partner can support the other. When they reach their promised land, each one will veer away from the other one for about a half-mile, so they don't stake the same quarter section. They'll drop off their conveyances, stick up their flags, make note of the time, and then they're ready to go see the land agent. But it would be almost impossible for a man—or a girl—to do it alone."

Marion's face was flushed. She looked up into Fowler's eyes as though she had plans of her own, which did not include the solemn, slab-sided Welch.

Something of the girl's enthusiasm conveyed itself to Fowler and he felt a flush of color rising in his own cheeks. Then the girl stood up on tiptoes and kissed him. As she did, she whispered in his ear:

"I don't care what folks are saying. I'm sure you didn't kill him. But there was talk of hanging you, and I know you would be the last to hear of it!"

Fowler was stunned by the impact of the words. For the moment he thought his ears had been tricking him. Then he gripped Marion by the shoulders, and looked beyond the girl to the two cavalry officers who were watching him with an amused smile.

"I didn't kill who?" he asked.

"My father," Marion replied in husky tones. "Some of the men who were at Carter's last night after you left me, came by this morning and said that you gunned down my father, then killed Wes Gillen when he tried to interfere. It—well, it all sounds distorted. But you were the one who told me this was a wild and rough place, and the men did say something about making you a—I think they called it a cottonwood apple."

"That's the term," Fowler nodded.

"Mister Welch says that means they want to hang you—before the race starts tomorrow at noon."

Clay Fowler's jaw grew taut. A gleam of defiance sparkled in his eyes. He patted the girl on her shoulder and said:

"Thanks for your confidence. I'll promise you that it isn't misplaced. You know I didn't kill your father. Maybe Wes Gillen didn't either. He might have pulled the trigger of the gun that fired the murder bullet; but someone bigger was manipulating Gillen as though he were a giant puppet, a killer marionette. It'll be my job to dig up that big man. I'll do it, I swear it!"

Tears came into Marion Neale's eyes. She backed away from Fowler slowly, then turned and, gathering her heavy skirts up about her legs, darted away toward the shelter of the Studebaker wagon.

CHAPTER 7

Clayton Fowler turned to rejoin Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton, after watching Marion Neale safely into the shelter of the wagon. As he was looking around he was suddenly conscious of someone else standing close by.

"If you were looking for the soldiers," said a musical voice, "they were called away. A soldier with broad yellow stripes on his arms hurried up and spoke to the older man. The captain, I presume."

"Thank you," Fowler replied. Then he had a chance to study the speaker. She was an attractive young woman, of a definitely dark turn of countenance which indicated a strain of Spanish blood at least. Her hair was tightly brushed against her well-formed head, and was gathered at the nape of her neck.

Her eyes were dark and long-lashed, and she spoke with a musical lilt to her words. Now that she had disposed of Fowler's companions, she said:

"I am Kitty Trotter, Mr. Fowler. I was rather impressed by the simple services. Did you like them?"

"They were touching and effective," Fowler agreed. "I didn't know Colonel Neale except for a few brief moments before his murder. But I'm sure, after meeting his wife and daughter, that he was a simple man. Such a man would want his services to be simple, too."

"Exactly," Kitty Trotter told him. "I can see that you are a man who can delve into the deeper things behind a person's make-up. I like a person of that caliber."

Clayton Fowler did not know just how he happened to find himself strolling along the creek trail with the girl, but some compelling force guided him. Kitty was a fascinating creature, and she was definitely exerting all of her wiles to make a favorable impression upon young Fowler.

"I couldn't help overhearing Miss Neale when she told you about the lynch talk," the girl finally remarked.

Instinctively Fowler's fingers caressed his throat, and a half-smile came to his face as he asked:

"Did you take it seriously?"

"Rather," Kitty replied, stretching the word out with a languorous sigh. "You see, I happened to be in Comanche Carter's place when the talk was stirred up."

"Stirred up?" Fowler asked. "Who would be stirring up that kind of talk?"

Kitty Trotter shrugged her shoulders.

"Who knows how lynch talk starts or spreads along the frontier?" she asked. "A wise man is usually forewarned, and then he does not endanger his neck."

Clayton Fowler pricked up his ears at this frank statement, looked at the girl with new interest and asked:

"Were you sent out here to warn me off, or frighten me off? Is Buck McGann afraid I may cut down some more of his land-grabbing coyotes?"

"Buck McGann?" Kitty Trotter repeated the name calmly. "I don't think I've met the gentleman. As for warning you off, I had no idea you would be at the Neale funeral, and if you're planning on going anywhere, I'd—well, I'd like to ride along."

Clayton Fowler weighed this suggestion with some misgivings.

"I don't mind going for a ride," he finally managed, "if that's what you're suggesting. I like riding. I've spent most of my waking hours in the saddle for a good many years. But I like to eat, too."

Kitty Trotter preferred to consider this as a left-handed invitation, so she said:

"Comanche Carter serves some pretty good meals. Let's go there. Then we can look over the Kansas countryside. They say the soldiers like to shoot at you if you head in the other direction."

"I sort of lost my appetite the last time I was there," Fowler reminded her.

Kitty nodded her understanding, then gripped him by the sleeve of his shirt and replied:

"Don't let that worry you. I think it will have a good effect on some of the boys there."

Fowler didn't want either Carter or his associates to think that the brush with McGann and his men had frightened him, so he permitted Kitty to lead him to the big tent saloon and restaurant.

The Missouri man was on his guard during the first few moments he was in the tent emporium, but no one gave him any particular attention. When they were completing their meal Comanche Carter came down through the aisle, nodded to his friends on all sides, and finally stopped behind Kitty Trotter's chair. He bowed to the girl, then smiled at Fowler and asked:

"Come to tell me that you're going to take me up on the deal I mentioned?"

"Not right now," Fowler replied promptly. "But it's worth thinking about. I've been hearing things around town that indicate I'm not too popular; maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to have me working for you. It might be bad for business—especially when the boys got to shooting at those hanging lights."

Carter's mouth split in a wide grin, and he said:

"Let me worry about that."

Then the frontier saloon keeper strolled away. Fowler and the girl finished their meal, then paid the reckoning and went toward the cavalry camp where the scout saddled Ranger and drew on the Army remuda for a mount for the girl.

In the saddle, the pair headed northwestward and splashed across Payne's Creek. They mounted the embankment on the far side, and then breasted the deep prairie grass where the Kansas farmers fattened the steers that had come up the long trail from Texas. Some of the grass was drying out from the heat, but windbreaks and irrigation ditches kept the greater part of it green.

The turmoil and excitement of the boomer camps died away,. and finally the young couple were alone, jogging along on their two horses. Clayton Fowler was a bit uncertain as to just what he ought to expect on this ride, and more or less expected Kitty to take the lead in the conversation. She discussed trivial matters until finally Fowler's curiosity got the better of him and he asked:

"What does a girl like you expect to find in the Cherokee Outlet?"

Kitty Trotter tossed her head, turned and looked around her as though afraid someone in the vast, silent expanses of the plains might overhear what she was about to tell Fowler, then replied:

"There will be lots of ways to earn a living in the Outlet without taking up farmland. I'm thinking of opening an establishment at Medford or Pond Creek or Enid, whichever one looks as though it's going to be the big town in this neck of the woods."

"An establishment?" Fowler was purposely being obtuse. He studied the girl carefully, not wanting to give full credence to the suspicions that were crowding into his mind.

"That's right," Kitty said coquettishly. She turned her back to him for a moment, and looked out over the rolling Kansas country toward the horizon where the sky was an upturned bowl of blue and the sun was a brassy ball dipping toward the Rocky Mountains.

"What are you going to run? A boarding house, a dance hall, or a gambling place?"

Kitty Trotter weighed this question for some moments, then answered:

"You might call it a combination of the three, if you get what I mean."

Clayton Fowler nodded. Then he commented:

"It sounds interesting."

"I think you'd be a big help in a place like that. You know how the fellows are out here along the frontier. When a woman is running a place, they immediately get ideas, and they're inclined to be forward. But with a big strapping fellow like you around to keep them in line, I'm sure everything would work out all right."

"Me?" Fowler was surprised. He tightened up on the reins so abruptly that Ranger reared up on his hind legs, and curvetted around as though he were on parade.

"Certainly," Kitty told him. "I'm making you an offer. It'll pay much better than grubbing in the ground on any one hundred and sixty acres, and trying to make corn and beans come up where there's never been anything but buffalo grass."

She cocked her head to one side, and there was a devilish glint in her eyes. Clayton Fowler would have been less than a man if he had failed to be aroused by the girl. But he was noted on the frontier for his ability to keep his wits about him, and he now decided that fencing was his best weapon.

"You heard Comanche Carter talking to me in the tent," he said. "I've sort of half committed myself to him, if I do decide to do anything besides farming."

"Comanche Carter?" The girl's laughter tinkled merrily; then she asked: "Do you really think you'd rather work for him than me? I don't think it would be very romantic going for a ride in the moonlight with Comanche when business got a little slow. Do you?"

Clayton Fowler chuckled at this. And they were still joking with each other when suddenly they pulled out on a hard-packed trail, and Fowler's keen ears heard the sound of galloping hoofs. He scanned the countryside about him, and finally caught a glimpse of a buckskin-clad man approaching them.

A frown crossed Kitty's brows, but if Fowler noticed it, he gave it no particular thought. The horseman came up alongside them, and when he spied Kitty, he swept off his broad-brimmed Stetson.

"Howdy, Kitty," he said. "Who's yore gun-toting friend?"

Kitty Trotter looked from the newcomer to Clayton Fowler, then said:

"Pecos Porter, make yourself acquainted with Clayton Fowler. He's chafing at the bit, waiting for the signal cannon to go off tomorrow at noon, so he can head into the Cherokee Outlet."

Porter studied Fowler as though curious to see what a land-runner looked like, then turned back to Kitty and asked:

"This one of the boys you have on your string?"

Kitty brought up the riding crop that dangled from her wrist and swiped it in the direction of the Texas man. He managed to reel back away from it, but a flash of anger crossed his features.

As his arm came up and his fingers closed over the thongs of the crop, he said:

"You had no call to do that. I was just joking."

Clay Fowler pushed in between and Porter withdrew his hand from the leather straps. Kitty Trotter's face was flushed.

"I don't call that a joke," she declared emphatically. "Mr. Fowler and I were discussing business. He's nothing but a friend of mine. If I want him to help me take care of my investments in the Indian Territory, that's up to me."

Pecos Porter was recapturing some of his original verve, and his laughter swept aside any hint of venom.

"I'm sorry, Kitty," he apologized. "But a fellow has a right to know where he stands when he meets up with a girl out riding with another man. No offense meant, no offense."

Clayton Fowler could see that this exchange between Porter and the girl could easily develop serious consequences, so he consulted a heavy, turnip-size gold watch, and then said:

"I think we've ridden far enough. The sun is lowering in the West. We'll be a long while getting back to Payne's Creek. Things ought to be really stirring tonight. Let's head back."

Kitty Trotter nodded her agreement. They spurred their horses around. Pecos Porter's fingers went to the brim of his hat in mock salute and he said:

"See you again, Kitty. Good hunting."

The girl ignored him, and quickened the pace of her mount to widen the distance between them.

"Sociable cuss," Fowler laughed, hoping to ease matters.

"That's not my idea of sociability," Kitty said emphatically. "I've seen quite enough of Pecos Porter. I hope our trails don't cross again for a long time."

Right now, for the first time since Clay had met her, Kitty Trotter appeared to be a helpless but determined woman, trying her best to get ahead in a man's world. Apparently the task had become too much for her, and she was looking around for a strong shoulder to lean upon.

"Pecos Porter used to work for me back in St. Louis," she told him. "My mother and I ran a large boarding house, and we did a good business, catering to people who came up the river from New Orleans and were planning to go up the Missouri River, or overland by railroad, stage or on horseback. Porter came up with a trail herd heading for the stockyards, and drank away his riding wages. We gave him a helping hand. Now he thinks he owns me."

Clayton Fowler digested this information with some interest, then asked the obvious question:

"What's your mother doing now?"

Kitty Trotter swallowed several times; then her long-fingered hand closed over the leather cuff of Fowler's right arm, and she said:

"Mother's gone. I couldn't stay alone in the places where we were together so much. That's one reason I've come out here. You understand, don't you?"

"I'm a blundering fool," Fowler said. "I should have known it was something like that. I'm sorry."

The girl patted his arm, and looked at him with beseeching eyes. Then she remarked:

"Now you see why a strong man is so important to me."

"I think I do," Fowler agreed. "Perhaps we can do something about it. Don't worry."

This half-promise on his part had a brightening effect upon the girl, and after riding for several miles in sober silence, they finally regained the old spirit of camaraderie that had marked the early part of their ride.

The hum and murmur of Payne's Creek came to their ears when they were still over a mile from the place. Upon a little knoll north of the stream they halted and watched the movement of the long black queue, stretching out to east and west, that was the feverishly hopeful line of boomers awaiting the following noon and the signal gun.

They left their horses at the Army picket line, and then strolled toward Comanche Carter's place. They were some distance away from the tent emporium when Kitty Trotter said:

"I think I'll be running on now. I'll see you in the morning."

"How are you going in?" Fowler asked her.

"On the train," the girl replied. "If you want to take me up on my business deal, meet me there." She waved good-by and blew him a kiss. Fowler watched her hurry off to a small tent she occupied by herself.

After the girl had gone on her way, Fowler was torn between conflicting emotions. He brushed his hand across his forehead as though this gesture could wipe out the quandary that possessed him. Then he heard someone near him and he turned to face Marion Neale.

"Hello, Marion," he said pleasantly. "What are you doing out here?"

"I came to see whether you had changed your mind about the horse. I saw you and Kitty. She's nice, isn't she? I suppose our little deal is off." There was a huskiness in the Kentucky girl's voice.

"Off?" Clay Fowler was puzzled, being inexperienced in the analysis of the workings of the feminine mind. "By no means. I'll give Ranger a rubdown and a feed of oats; then you can take him up to your wagons. Come along with me."

Marion Neale quickened her steps to keep up with his long strides.

When they were alongside the Army picket line, Fowler began currying the horse, and the girl watched him with interest. Then Clay asked:

"Does Silver Dollar Welch know you're down here visiting with me?"

Marion shook her head slowly, pouted, then asked:

"No, but does that make so much difference?"

"Not especially," Fowler laughed. "But I thought he kept an eagle eye on you, just as though I were a vulture trying to steal a prized possession from him. Where is he now?"

"Oh, he went up the line a ways to attend to business."

Clayton Fowler dismissed the matter without further comment. He completed the job on the Ranger horse, then handed Marion the reins and said:

"Good luck, kid. I'll be seeing you in Enid, if not before."

Marion stood on her tiptoes before Fowler could say anything, planted a kiss on his lips and replied:

"You're a prince, Clay. Thanks for everything."

Then she shortened her grip on the reins, turned away, and strolled off down the trail, the gray gelding mincing along behind her.

CHAPTER 8

Fowler watched the girl until she was out of sight beyond a group of wagons. All about him there were scenes of activity. Men were busy greasing the big wheels of their wagons. Some of them had the wheels off, and the huge Conestogas, Studebakers and Waynes were jacked up on blocks while they administered to creaking axles.

Others were loading packs that would be slung aboard mules or horses in the morning. Here and there was the sound of ringing metal at an impromptu forge. The women folk were bustling around their own particular activities. Some of them were kneeling alongside the flat rocks at the edge of the creek, doing a week's wash, not knowing when they would get the chance again. Several were working over Dutch ovens, turning out sourdough biscuits or corn pone.

Now and then one of the cavalry soldiers or a Cherokee Scout rode by, watching for any disturbance, and showing in his mien and expression the tenseness that filled him as the hour of excitement drew near. Tonight the shores of Payne Creek were black with people. They

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were a part of a two hundred mile long human snake stretching as far as the eye could see in both directions.

Tomorrow night the exodus would be past, and only the stragglers would remain: the old and the halt and the lame and the blind, awaiting some news of lucky relatives before they moved up into the promised land.

While Fowler was musing along this line, a cavalryman on a tired-looking mount turned in beside the Missouri man. This fellow wasn't so dapper and impressive-looking as the men who rode with Larson and Norton. His clothes were faded, and the yellow stripe down his trouser legs was dimmed by the dust of many frontier miles.

As the man flung himself from his horse, almost bowling over Clay Fowler, he said:

"You durned old maverick, making a man ride clear from the Cimarron to the Arkansas to find hide or hair of you. I thought you'd be over in the Salt Fork country. What're you doing down here? Do you like the smell of wood smoke from that steaming tea kettle puffing away down there on the track? I thought you were a man who liked to breathe air. Gol darn you, Fowler, you old buzzard!"

The cavalryman's flow of words didn't stop until he ran out of breath. Then Clay Fowler began pounding him on the back, oblivious to the cloud of alkali dust that billowed out of the fellow's regimentals.

"Laddy Graham, you old poison-peddler. What are you doing here?"

"I've got my discharge, and my pay check, and I've got a hankering to settle down and make some woman happy and proud of me."

Clay Powell studied Laddy Graham with interest. There was no finer soldier on the frontier, even though his physical appearance didn't make him very prepossessing at a hoe-down or a shindig. Graham was well past forty, and had a leathery skin that reminded the casual observer of a war-worn turkey gobbler.

Somehow Clayton Fowler just couldn't imagine Graham as a ladies' man, nor could he see him settled down on a homestead.

"I got a glimpse of that filly who just traipsed off with your bronc, son. Anything doing there?"

"Doing?" Fowler asked. Then he shook his head quickly and replied: "Oh, no, nothing like that."

"Shucks," Graham snorted. "I thought I might be able to talk you into settling down alongside of me. Sort of keep the Injuns off my right flank."

Clay Fowler studied his one-time trail companion in the Indian country, and then the old-time smile crossed his face as he said:

"By gosh, Laddy, I think you mean it. Who'd think that Corporal Laidlaw Graham would give up chasing Comanches and go out chasing gophers! Nelson Miles would have a fit."

"Plague take Nelson Miles. He came near running my legs off up to the knees, chasing after them Apaches. I'm entitled to a little rest."

"Keno," Fowler returned. "You want to make the run, and you want me to go in with you. Is that it?"

"Sure thing," Laddy Graham replied, some of his old pepper coming back into his runty frame. "Now you sound like the real Clay Fowler, my old saddle pard. I thought for a time you were getting yourself tangled up in red hair braids and apron strings."

Clayton Fowler shrugged. Then he gripped Laddy's arm and said:

"You look as though you've come a far piece, and didn't stop to oil your tonsils. Let's drift down to Comanche Carter's place and put on the nose bag and the baby's bottle."

Graham stopped long enough to unsaddle his horse, sling the bridle over a tree branch, and turn the animal in with the Army cavvy. Then the two campaigners moved off down the street arm in arm.

"Mister," Graham said enthusiastically, "I've got us just the place. All we've got to do is get to it, and stake it out."

"What sort of a place is that, Laddy?" Clay Fowler asked, with some enthusiasm. Since meeting Marion Neale and Kitty Trotter, Clay was getting ideas about a homestead himself.

"Well," Laddy Graham said, frowning as though not quite sure just how to explain matters, "it's down on Red Rock Creek, about forty miles east of the railroad, and it's the ideal place. There's good water, rolling hills, and several good forest areas nearby for shelter against the weather. One of those tree clumps would make a good site for a ranch house."

Fowler was studying the activities of his fellow boomers as he strolled along, and at the same time digesting the information Laddy Graham was giving him. Finally he said:

"Trying to get in on a section that's forty miles east of here doesn't sound very good, unless we head over there tonight, and get ready to break south from over in the Tonkawa and Ponca country."

Clay Fowler couldn't tell Laddy Graham that there was something else that would prevent him from proving up on a piece of homestead property for the time being. If he could get Laddy settled, and they went into partnership, he could take care of the job that had brought hi mout to the Cherokee Strip, and also settle down afterwards.

"Okay," Fowler finally agreed, offering his capable right hand, "I'll go in with you. But you're going to have to hold onto the place with gun law once you get settled on it. You know that, don't you?"

Laddy Graham laughed loudly, then. He studied the younger man and said:

"Mr. Fowler, in the cavalry we always stick together. I've got a couple of my boys from the old outfit, and they're already to move in and camp with me tomorrow. They're not interested in settling down. They'd like to have another couple of hitches in the Army. The colonel over east asked them to help with controlling the boomers. When the guns go off, they're on their own. Then they'll have to head for their posts in Texas. Their outfit is at Fort Stockton."

"Fort Stockton is a long way on furlough pay," Fowler pointed out. "How are they going to make it?"

Corporal Laidlaw Graham looked at his scout companion. He knew that Fowler had strict ethical standards, and he was wondering whether the Missouri man would consider the actions of the happy-go-lucky soldiers as reprehensible.

"Oh," Laddy finally replied, "they pick up a little money from the sooners."

Fowler knew that the sooners were the cheating landsharks who were moving in ahead of the honest settlers. Buck McGann had mentioned them as the representatives of an organized group working to keep the fair-minded pioneers from preëmpting the choice bits of land in the Outlet. Fowler had little or no sympathy for them.

"How do they work that?" he asked with some interest, curious about all the angles of this great human experiment.

Laddy cocked a finger alongside of his nose as though he were imparting confidential information, then said:

"The soldiers usually know just where the sooners are camped. While they are patrolling, if they come across one, the first thing the fellow will do is offer the soldier a bribe not to report him."

"They're not supposed to report them, are they?"

"No," agreed Laddy, "when they're caught by the patrol, the soldier is supposed to put them out, but this doesn't always work, because some of the boomers along the Kansas line are pretty tough hombres, and they'd just as soon lynch a sooner as not."

"So the soldier accepts the bribe, is that it?" Clay Fowler wrinkled his nose as though the idea were unpleasant to him.

"That isn't the end of it, by a long shot. When the first soldier collects his ten dollar bill, he tells his relief about it. So the second soldier goes up and collects. This goes on until all the sooner's ready money has been exhausted. The last soldier on the scene, not getting anything, dutifully escorts the sooner to his officer at the border, and he is given special recognition for his action. Perhaps a promotion doesn't look as big as a ten dollar bill, but it is something."

Clay Fowler chuckled then, amused at the way in which the ill-gotten gains of Buck McGann and men of his stripe were being dissipated to the soldiers. Then they drew close to the tent restaurant and saloon of Comanche Carter, and as though thoughts of McGann had materialized the man himself, Fowler was suddenly aware of a loud-voiced conversation.

A tall spare-looking man was the center of a group. Graham halted with Fowler, and the pair of ex-cavalrymen tried to understand what was happening.

"It's Silver Dollar Welch!" Fowler said crisply. The words came from his lips more loudly than he had realized, and several members of the group turned toward him. He saw, then, that two of them were Buck McGann and Pug Bates. The man who had tried to steal his horse on the train was still as rough-looking and bearded as ever, and his bandaged shoulder made him look lopsided. Brown tobacco juice yellowed his beard somewhat, but nothing could change the color of his flashing eyes.

"What's going on here?" Fowler demanded, pushing forward on the tried and true theory that a good offense is the best defense.

As he moved into the gun-hung group, Fowler realized that he had come up against a real humdinger of a scramble. He saw now that two of the men held drawn guns and were pressing them against the sides of Silver Dollar Welch.

Buck McGann sneered and said:

"Sticking your nose into matters at the wrong time again?"

Clay Fowler ignored the others entirely, knowing that Laddy Graham would cover his back, and turned to Buck McGann.

"What's wrong with your land deals?" he asked. "Are they going so far wrong that you have to go in for highway robbery now?"

McGann stiffened, his own fingers hovering over the butt of his gun. The tails of his long black coat were brushed aside and the butt of his gun was thrust forward.

"Welch came down here looking for trouble, and we have a habit of parceling it out when a hombre can't take no for an answer."

"I don't think I savvy," Fowler declared calmly. He turned his attention to Welch and the two gunmen who stood on either side of him.

Silver Dollar Welch looked at the scout with a worried expression. Fowler asked:

"What's your story, Welch?"

Lester Welch looked around him, as though studying the temper of the men near him. Then he cleared his throat and said:

"Last night someone got into the corral where the Neales keep their Kentucky thoroughbreds. We heard the disturbance before anything happened. I got out in time to follow the disturbers away, and they headed in this direction. I figured to come down here today and straighten things out. Looks like I made a bad mistake."

Clay Fowler weighed this information for some moments. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw a movement behind Welch, and one of the gunman pushed the tall, thin Silver Dollar against Fowler.

Guns started roaring at once, and hot lead sped past Fowler's ear, narrowly missing his head. Fowler, in the midst of a crowd of enemies, knew that the advantage was with him.

As long as Laddy Graham stayed in the background, and Welch was off to the side, anyone in front of Fowler was an enemy.

The Missouri man's six-guns came up into his hands like well-oiled pistons, and he thumbed back on the hammers and beat a brisk tattoo.

The gunman who had made the sneak play was down in his own blood, and rolling up against one of the stakes that held the big tent. The canvas structure shuddered from the impact. Then Fowler was dancing to the side, and pulling up his right-hand gun to whip McGann across the face.

Laddy Graham waded in at this point, and with him were Lieutenant Paul Norton and Fred Larson. The captain shouted:

"Throw down, boys, or we'll finish the job."

With McGann out of action, and their own casualties rather heavy, the other gunmen moved off into the Carter tent saloon. Fowler and Graham and the two cavalry officers surveyed the field. The sneak gunman was dead. One of the others was wounded. But Silver Dollar Welch was also down on the ground with a blood-smeared wound in his shoulder.

Clay Fowler knelt down to attend to him. Much of the man's trouble was probably due to bullet shock, but now he was coming out of it.

Fowler and Graham helped him to his feet. The two cavalry officers then escorted him down the street toward the Neale camp.

Fowler turned to Buck McGann, gripped him by the shoulder and said:

"What's your particular interest in the Neale family?"

McGann's face was streaked with blood and sweat, and the sneer he tried to force on it just wouldn't jell. Finally he said:

"I have nothing against the Neales, nor anyone else here. I'm looking after my own interests, that's all."

The Missouri man nodded soberly. Then he studied his guns, reloaded them, and declared emphatically:

"You can't blame a man for taking care of his own interests, but from now on, I'd be careful that my interests didn't conflict with the Neales'."

Buck McGann sniffed. Then he snarled:

"Going soft on the heifer, hey?"

Fowler's fist came up in a sharp arc, and exploded on McGann's chin. The land hog stiffened, then wilted to the ground like a fallen forest giant. Fowler turned away and strolled off in the wake of Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton and their burden.

CHAPTER 9

When the group accompanying Silver Dollar Welch arrived back at the Neale camp, the women folks were extremely excited. They had already borne one heavy blow with pioneer stoicism, but it was too much to hope that they would be able to stand two such emotional shocks within as many days.

Inside one of the wagons, with darkness closing in about them, Fowler and Graham lighted lanterns. They stretched Welch out on a crude pallet, and worked over his wound. It was not nearly so serious as the flow of blood indicated, and Fowler looked at Welch and said:

"You'll live to brawl some more, I reckon. But there's just one bit of advice I'd like to give you. Don't ever buck up against a crew like McGann's, unless you're a lot quicker on the draw than you were today. It was like a hog getting his hind leg out of a mudhole. These boys who ride with McGann are chain lightning."

There was the sweat of pain on Welch's brow, but he managed a smile and said:

"I reckon you're right, hombre. I'll know better next time."

They settled the man comfortably; then Fowler and Graham joined the others outside and reported Welch's condition. Finally Laddy said:

"We still didn't get that surrounding of chuck we were stalking when the gunplay interrupted us."

Mrs. Neale looked at the men, and asked:

"Why not join us here?"

Fowler turned to Marion and studied the girl's expression. There was a flicker of her eyelashes; then she lowered her head slightly. Fowler thought he interpreted the gesture, and he said:

"Thanks just the same, Mrs. Neale, but I reckon we'll head back to Carter's. You'll be wanting your supplies for your trek into the Outlet."

"Come back later, anyway," Marion insisted, and so it was agreed.

The two cavalry officers joined the men in the stroll down to the big tent. The quartette expected trouble if McGann and his cohorts were still in the saloon. They found, however, that the land hog bunch had gone on its way.

The four men finally found a table, and were served by a bustling swamper. When they were half through their meal of stew, sourdough bread and the rough frontier trimmings, Clay

Fowler noticed a frown of worry on Captain Larson's face. He said:

"What's prodding you, Skipper? This time tomorrow night you won't have a thing to worry about, except maybe cleaning up the camp grounds along Payne's Creek."

"It's not tomorrow night I'm worrying about," Larson said soberly. "It's tonight."

"Tonight?" Fowler was curious. "What's going to happen tonight?"

"Nothing, I hope," Larson said listlessly. "But knowing human nature, I have a hunch that plenty will be happening."

Fowler looked from Laidlaw to the lieutenant as though they might be able to tell him more about the captain's fears. Finally Larson clarified the matter himself.

"It's those notaries' certificates," he declared. "We made a big mistake giving them out today. Even though it would have meant getting up at five o'clock tomorrow morning, they should have been distributed then. We did a good job of turning the tables on the men in the Strip up to yesterday, but I've got a hunch that where one sooner went across, tonight we'll have twenty of them going; and they'll all have the certificates making their settlement legal in the eyes of the big-wigs in Washington."

Clay Fowler realized the truth of Larson's statement, and he shook his head slowly.

"You're right," he agreed. "But it's too late to do very much about it now."

"Except crack down," Larson replied soberly. "I've given the men instructions to shoot down anyone in the Strip, without warning. The word has gone along the line, but I'm afraid we just haven't enough soldiers to carry it out."

Clay Fowler finished his meal, and when he was downing his last piece of apple pie, Captain Larson asked:

"How are you making out on your job, Clay?"

"I've got a few leads, but trying to follow them up in the big crowd that's gathered here is almost impossible. It's like finding a black bean in a coal pile. But when folks get spread out over the Strip, then I ought to come up with something."

Laddy Graham and Lieutenant Norton looked at Fowler. The lieutenant knew that something special had brought Fowler into the Cherokee Outlet at the time of the land rush, but this was news to Graham. Neither one asked for any details, since apparently Fowler and Larson had no intention of supplying them.

Settling back for an after-meal smoke, Fowler looked around him and saw that things were moving rather slowly in Comanche Carter's. He called this to Larson's attention. The captain remarked:

"Folks are going to bed early tonight. They don't need anything to pep them up. They want to be in good shape for the run tomorrow. Some of the boys who have been squeezing the dollars out of the boomers are already packing their tents."

Fowler nodded his agreement. They sat around for another twenty minutes or so, then left Carter's and returned to the Neale camp. Silver Dollar Welch was asleep, and the womenfolk were seated near a low fire on folding camp chairs.

Marion looked up and greeted the men. After some moments, Graham and the two officers withdrew, and Clay Fowler was left alone with the Neales. Marion was silent for some moments; then she asked:

"Do you still think I ought to make the run?"

"You want a home, don't you?" Fowler asked soberly.

"Yes," the girl admitted.

"This is the West," Fowler explained. "Out here even the roughest men don't make war on women."

"Not even men like Buck McGann and Pug Bates?" Marion inquired.

Fowler reflected before giving his answer, then said:

"No!"

The response was clipped and emphatic, but still sounded as though he were wondering at its accuracy.

"They struck at us when they killed Dad, and wounded Lester Welch, didn't they?" Mrs. Neale inquired soberly.

"That's the way it appears to you," Fowler replied. "But then they were fighting men, not women. A border rough seldom thinks beyond the consequences of his immediate action. They may think that with Welch laid up and the colonel dead, you won't want to go into the Strip, but that's about as far as their thinking goes."

"Do you think we ought to go?" Marion asked again.

"If you have the spirit," Fowler remarked soberly, "this is the time to test it. You've already borne a pretty heavy burden, so you're entitled to some compensation. This may be it; unless you're prepared for the long trek back to Kentucky, or a move up into wilder country where you don't know what handicaps will confront you."

The two women talked over the situation in hushed tones; then Marion said: "I'll go!"

Mrs. Neale went into her wagon a short time later, and Marion and Clay strolled off into the darkness in the direction of the rope paddock that held the horses. They stopped near Ranger, and the gray gelding whinnied his recognition and pleasure.

Clay patted the animal on the muzzle, and then whispered in a cocked ear:

"You've got a job tomorrow, gray boy. You're going to take this young lady just where she wants to go, and see that nothing happens to her."

Ranger shook his head as though he understood every word his master was telling him. Perhaps he did, for the liaison between Fowler and Ranger was an intimate one, bred by years of contact on the plains and on the rugged terrain that bordered them.

Leaving the horse corral, the young folks strolled down to a secluded part of the Creek. The couple were silent for a while; then Marion said soberly:

"I wish you were going with me. It would make everything so much easier."

"I'd like to be going with you," Clay replied solemnly. "I'm sure it would insure your safety, and there's nothing I desire more. But I'm not my own boss. I'm out here on a mission, and upon it depends the lives and safety of thousands of people. I've pledged my word, and I can't go back upon it."

Marion looked up into his eyes, brushed her cheek against his and asked:

"What is the mission?"

"It's a secret," Fowler told her. "There are only a few people who know what it's all about. We're not telling anyone else, because we don't know just how far into the Territory its tentacles may go."

Marion stiffened at this, and huddled against Clay. He put his arm on her shoulder and said:

"I know how much you depend upon me, and I'm glad, too. I hope there'll be a time when we'll be able to work something out together. But tonight isn't the time. You've had enough heartbreak with the death of your father, and the wounding of his partner. I don't want you worrying about me."

Clay left her shortly afterward, and strolled back in the moonlight to the shelter he shared with Laddy Graham near the cavalry encampment.

CHAPTER 10

The morning of Saturday, September 16th, 1893, finally dawned. Clay Fowler, Laddy Graham, Captain Fred Larson, Lieutenant Paul Norton, and the hundreds of other men like them stretched along the two hundred mile strip of Kansas Border facing the Cherokee Outlet. All dressed themselves and prepared their morning meal with a consciousness of the great responsibility that rested upon them.

The day was no different from those of the past month, offered no encouragement or respite to those who had been hoping for cooling showers to soothe fretted nerves or calm raging tempers.

As they gathered around their morning mess, Clay Fowler said soberly: "This is it!"

Captain Fred Larson had no words to express the feelings that gripped him. He nodded his head slowly; then his keen eyes glanced across the portable table and out beyond the staked markers that were the Kansas Border. Every fifty yards or so, a blue-clad cavalryman was mounted upon a sturdy charger. The Stetson campaign hat of the man was pulled down over his forehead to protect his face from the heat and dust, and to give him a keener view of the moving mass of humanity before him.

A carbine was gripped in the hand of each yellow-leg, and his tight clasp on it indicated that he was wondering whether it would be necessary to use it upon the friends and neighbors who were seeking a future in this promised land.

The day was hot and dry, and there was a south wind blowing up across the Outlet, with a biting edge to it that might have been gathered in its course across Texas and the Indian Territory.

Along the winding road that came down toward Payne's Creek from Caldwell a number of those who had spent the night in the town's one hotel were arriving for the historic hour of noon. Many of them had been sleeping four or five in a room, but they didn't mind that. It was one last touch of luxury before they bucked the forces of nature to wrest a farm from its grip.

At eight o'clock, Fowler and the others were finished eating, and the Missouri man started down the street. People looked at him. Many of them were wary of any man who wore a six-gun at his hip, and they looked askance at a two-gun man like Clay Fowler.

No one challenged him, however, and he

reached the Neales' without incident. He found Silver Dollar Welch sitting up in the wagon, eating a broth the women had concocted. Marion Neale was dressed in a pair of denim overalls and a brush jacket, which must have been warm, but which would be appreciated if she had to camp out on the cool prairie with no other shelter. Her long titian hair was bunched up under a flat-crowned hat.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"You always look good to me," Fowler told her. "But I've got one suggestion to make. Braid your hair, and let it hang down over your shoulders."

Mrs. Neale and Silver Dollar Welch shook their heads slowly as though they did not agree with Fowler. Finally the mother said:

"That's dangerous, isn't it? After all, Marion is just a young lady in the first flush of her womanhood. There are many men here on this frontier who haven't seen a clean, wholesome girl like her for months, or even years. There's no telling what might happen to her. With her hair piled up on her head under that hat, she looks like a youth out for his first big adventure."

There was some wisdom in Mrs. Neale's idea, but Fowler put one arm on the girl's shoulder and asked:

"Didn't we agree that the men on the frontier didn't fight with women?"

"Yes," replied the girl soberly.

"Then you've got to let them know you're a woman," he pointed out. "If they think you're nothing but a youth seeking his first big adventure, you're likely to get a bullet in the back, and a grave under a cutbank. This way, you'd have half a chance, especially when Ranger puts you out in front of the crowd."

There was quite a discussion between Mrs. Neale, Welch and Fowler, and finally Silver Dollar said:

"I blame myself for this whole business. If I'd left well enough alone yesterday, I would be going out with Marion, and we wouldn't have to worry about things."

"We're not going to worry about things now," Marion declared emphatically. "There's a power watching over me up above, and I'm sure he'll agree with Clay Fowler that I'll be safe, if I'm alert and aggressive."

The matter was finally left at this point. Clay pulled a bundle from his shoulder, and the little family group studied it with interest.

"What's that?" Marion asked.

"A sheepskin waterbag," Fowler explained. "I got it from the Indians down in the Southwest. It's much better than a canteen, and carries three or four times the water. I know the Cherokee Outlet, and I'm telling you now that more boomers are going to lose out for lack of water than for any other thing. A horse can drink a powerful lot of water. Out there on the prairie wilderness you'll find there are few wells, and scarcely a stream that hasn't dried up in its bed."

This was a sobering thought, and Marion realized as she strolled toward the willow-lined bank of Payne's Creek that she would have overlooked it entirely, if Clay Fowler hadn't come to remind her of it.

"That's one advantage the bicycle boys will have," Marion laughed. "They won't have to carry along water for their mounts."

"Maybe so," Fowler agreed, "but they'll have to stick pretty close to the Indian and game trails. Bicycles weren't built for bouncing over rough prairie rangelands."

Fowler knelt and filled the sheepskin, then showed the girl how to fasten it, and how it worked. Rider and mount would be watered just before noon and the time for moving up to the starting line.

The greatest mass of early risers was already equipped and at the stretch of line on both sides of the Kansas and Texas railroad track. There was an occasional water tank alongside the railroad track, to supply water for the locomotives, and undoubtedly these tanks would receive heavy demands from the boomers.

Even so, once the boomers riding along the railroad track spread out to take up their homesteads, the water would be of small use to them. Others who had given no more thought to the water situation than Marion had were bunched up alongside the railroad track, because they knew that the farm land near the railroad would be the most desirable.

Some of these folks, such as Kitty Trotter and Comanche Carter, had no interest in the farmland itself, but were anxious to file on the town lot sites that would be available for men interested in setting up business enterprises.

These town sites had already been laid out alongside the various water tank stations. The land office regulations permitted a man to file on either a farm site or a town lot, but he could not file on both.

Clay Fowler checked Ranger's gear, and again talked confidentially to the big gray gelding. Then he patted Marion's hand and wished her good luck.

She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth. He flushed.

"Good luck, Marion! Good luck."

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Fowler's steps took him down toward the temporary station of the Kansas and Texas Railway, where he had unloaded his horse Ranger and his other animals upon his arrival. The town-sitters and land-seekers were all gathered close to the station and a harried ticket agent was selling space on the train. Now the big-stacked locomotive was attached to a special accommodation train of ten cattle cars.

Clay Fowler strolled up to where Big Tim Brady, the engineer, was working along the drive rods and oiling his bearings, and stood talking to him for a while.

"How are you going to work it, Tim?" he asked.

Holding his long-nosed oilcan in his hand, the engineer turned around to the Missouri scout, smiled and said:

"I've had all kinds of advice on that. Right now the cow catcher is on the starting line, and like you can see, we've got steam up, and we're loaded to the front trucks with people. I don't know what's going to happen if one of the people in the middle of a car wants to get off at the first stop. I'm almost afraid to stop."

"That's what I meant," Fowler pointed out.

"Well," Tim explained, "we're going to make a brief stop at each town site along the line. We've got orders not to run more than eight miles an hour. They figure the horses will be able to keep up that gait, so the folks on the train won't have any special advantage."

Clay Fowler walked around the engine with Big Tim Brady, and finally climbed up into the cab. As he settled on the platform before the red-hot fire box, he saw a large peach basket in one corner of the tender near the coal shovel. The basket was half full of currency.

The Missouri man picked up several of the bills and looked at them. A puzzled frown crossed his face, and he turned to Brady.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Handing out samples?"

Big Tim chuckled, then looked at the fireman who was up on top of the fuel pile.

"No," he explained, "those are contributions from the passengers. They figure I might make a mistake when I'm looking at the speed gauge."

Clay Fowler realized that there were any number of ways of making money here, but at the same time, he sensed that the advantage thus gained, even if the train went fifteen miles per hour, would be only temporary. A man who reached the town site a half-hour ahead of his friend on horseback would still have to get to his mile marker to file his flags and papers, and on foot he would be lucky to cover a mile or two in that time, so his area of operation around the railroad track would be restricted.

The Missouri man wished the engineer luck on his run, and then turned to study other aspects of the human pandemonium that was going on all about him. He saw two groups that attracted his attention. One of them was made up of Buck McGann and his friends. They were camped about a half-mile back from the starting point, and didn't appear to be at all interested in the activities. Clayton Fowler made a mental note to look in on them a bit later on.

The second group was made up of Captain Larson, Lieutenant Norton, and three burly-looking men with silver stars on their vests. Clay headed toward them.

As he came up to the group, Larson turned around and said:

"Hello, Clay, make yourself acquainted with Sheriff Larry Dade. These are his deputies."

"Going to give the folks a send-off?" asked Fowler pleasantly.

"Not exactly," declared Captain Larson. "Sheriff Dade thought he might sort of calm things down in the Cherokee Strip if he went around and collected all the spare firearms that were being displayed."

Clay Fowler looked at the grim-jawed sheriff and said:

"That's not a bad idea, but it looks to me like a pretty big job to try and do in a couple of hours. Do you reckon you're going to start with me?"

"Not particularly," Dade said with a little chuckle. "I understand you've had need of your guns since you dropped in the other night. None of the mavericks you salivated are worth a second thought, as I see it."

The Missouri man accepted this statement with a shrug, then made a suggestion.

"If it's gunplay you want to avoid, I think you ought to try slick-hipping the real bad actors, and let the legitimate settlers hang onto their shooting irons. They're likely to need them for food and their own protection."

"Not a bad idea," Larry Dade agreed. He transmitted this suggestion to his deputies, and then, with their badges prominently displayed, the trio set about their business. As Fowler went off with the cavalry officers, he wondered what would happen when Dade and his boys came up against Buck McGann and his henchmen.

Fowler circulated among the various groups, getting some idea of how the various factions were reacting as the zero hour approached. He saw all kinds of people in his investigation, and they studied him with varying reactions. Some of them resented his kindly queries. Others were reticent about their plans.

"Pretty much of a cross-section of America," he decided, as he completed his jaunt in the neighborhood of the Carter place. Canvasbacks who must have had their training with some traveling circus or Wild West show were striking the big tent, and Carter was running around directing the men. He had completed plans for shipping his canvas building into Enid where he hoped to set up in business again.

While Fowler was standing watching the activities, Kitty Trotter came up to him, and said:

"Good mornnig, Clay. All ready for the big run?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Fowler told her. "But I'm not getting too excited about it. I reckon a man who hits the starting line at five minutes to twelve will have just as much chance as one who's been there since five o'clock this morning."

Kitty Trotter laughed heartily, and asked:

"Haven't you reached a decision about my job offer? Then you wouldn't have to make the run."

She arched her eyebrows as she made this suggestion. Fowler's eyes ran over her trim figure. The girl was wearing a tight-fitting silk dress, gathered in at her hips, while her skirts billowed out on either side.

Her lips were moist and inviting, and her dark hair was brushed to the sheen of a raven's wing. Clay looked her over from head to toe, then asked:

"Weren't you going down on the train?"

"Sure thing!" Kitty replied. "That's the way I'm going in."

"You're going to find it pretty hard to get aboard," Fowler told her. "I was down there about a half-hour ago, and the people hanging onto the engine and the cars didn't leave room for a good sized gnat."

Kitty Trotter smiled, then winked.

"Clay Fowler," she said naïvely, "you are so simple. There is a good deal of difference between a gnat and a pretty girl. Most people would be inclined to consider a gnat as something of a pest; but I don't think they ever look at a pretty girl in that way. I'll get aboard, don't you worry. Stop in and see me when you get to Enid."

Fowler nodded, watched the girl pick up a carpet bag and start down the street. One of Carter's swampers finally relieved her of the burden and followed her toward where the engine was huffing and puffing.

Comanche Carter joined him when Kitty Trotter left. The resort owner studied the Missouri man and asked:

"Kitty Trotter trying to take you away from me?"

"She's made me an offer," Fowler replied, realizing that Carter probably knew all about the situation. "But I'm still anxious to keep my own counsel."

"That's wise most of the time," Carter agreed, "but there are other times when it's downright foolish. I usually take care of a man when I'm interested in him."

Fowler nodded his understanding; then, watching Carter under the shadow of his furrowed brows, he said: "I understand that if you're not interested in a man, you have someone else take care of him."

Carter bristled at once, and roared: "What do you mean?"

"Sort of lead poisoning. I don't think it was a coincidence that Buck McGann and his boys murdered Colonel Neale in your place; and I don't think that brush with Silver Dollar Welch and myself was a happenstance either. Maybe you get what I mean."

Carter rubbed his finger along his mustache, looked at Fowler and said:

"I don't think I get you. I do keep a couple of gun hands to see that there is nothing out of order in my place of business. Aside from that, I don't make it a practice to interfere with anyone else's activities. You talk mighty proddy, young fellow."

"Maybe you're right," Fowler hedged a bit, "but you're in Kansas now, and there's organized law. Moving down into the Cherokee Outlet, you're going to be up against a different combination. There it'll be a case of gun law, and the Federal Government isn't likely to take as much from the border toughs as the Kansas sheriffs do."

Comanche Carter relaxed and commented laughingly:

"Sort of a case of deciding between marshal law and martial law, eh?"

It was Clay Fowler's turn to retreat momentarily. He wondered whether Carter was speaking from prior knowledge, or whether he had inside information as to what might be expected at the town sites along the Kansas Texas Railroad.

"See you around," Fowler finally declared. He turned on his high-heeled boot and strolled off. As he walked away, Clay studied his old-fashioned watch, checked the time with the brassy sun, and saw that it was eleven-twenty. Forty minutes from now, the big land rush would be on.

The restlessness of humans and animals seemed to be absorbed from the very land itself. Fowler sensed this more and more as he sought out the cavalry officers and watched them go about their business. He bumped into Sheriff Larry Dade and asked:

"Any luck with your gun corraling?"

"Picked up about two hundred guns," Dade said, "but I don't reckon that'll hold a candle to the number of shooting irons they have around here. I figure I took care of the worst desperadoes, though, and that's doing a heap of good for the law-abiding folks."

As the time drew near, the more sensible of the boomers showed their forethought. Most of them realized that the essential equipment for the run must include water, and food for several days, unless they happened to be planning to homestead near a town site where food supplies would be run down on trains later in the afternoon. Another important item was a blanket to roll up in on the prairie at night.

The people who were planning to make the run in buggies, buckboards or covered wagons limited the supplies they were toting to oats and water for their horses and food for the drivers.

This matter of food and water posed something of a problem for many of the horseback riders. They were not as lucky as Marion Neale, with a water bag that fit snugly across the back of the saddle, and didn't knock against the horse's rump at every galloping step.

The majority of these men merely carried a canteen of water for themselves, and a small spade, with which to dig a well. Digging in the dry creek beds would probably produce enough water for man and beast, if the shovel wielder was clever enough to select the right spots.

Powell finally located Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton. They were at the cavalry corral, saddling their horses. Laddy Graham was also there with his own mount, and he threw a hull aboard one of Clay Fowler's string. Fowler looked over the rangy dun that would serve until he could regain his gray gelding from Marion Neale.

The cavalry officers were comparing watches, and Fowler again drew out his big gold turnip and consulted it.

"How are you working it?" Fowler asked the captain.

"At the stroke of noon, over east, there will be a cavalry bugle blown. Then a cannon will be fired. As soon as the cavalry men out in front of the line hear the cannon, they will discharge their carbines. Each man along the line will carry along the signal."

Fowler nodded understandingly, and asked:

"How do the yellow-legs get out of the way when the rush comes through?"

Larson's face blanched a bit at this thought, and he finally replied:

"That's a thought, too. But they're all good riders. They ought to be able to stay ahead of the crush long enough for it to thin out."

The four men pushed through the press of people at the Kansas-Cherokee line, and moved out into the no-man's land before it. Other men watched them carefully, anxious to make sure that no man gained an advantage over them. They had all been waiting too long for this.

Captain Larson planned to join the cavalryman who was closest to the railroad and west of it. This man was on a little knoll, with trees atop it, and had a view of activities to the east and west. From there they would be able to watch the progress of the rush, and the crush of horsemen and vehicles would undoubtedly break around this island of lifted land.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" Fowler asked Larson as they finally reached their station.

"No, I never did," Larson admitted frankly, "and I never want to see anything like it again. But it's America! It's progress! It's an Empire in the making."

Finally on the zephyr that blew in from their right there was the sound of a gunshot. Then another one sounded nearer, and finally the cavalryman beside them discharged his weapon.

The race into the Cherokee Outlet was on! September 16th, 1893 was writing its place in American history!

CHAPTER 11

As the gunshot sounded, a mass movement of between five and eight thousand people directly in front of the little party on the knoll was begun. In either direction, other thousands of people were moving southward from the Kansas Border into the Cherokee Outlet. Reliable estimates determined that at least one hundred thousand people moved into the area to take up about twenty thousand farms.

Watching the line move forward from his vantage point on the knoll, Clayton Fowler caught his breath. So did Laddy Graham and the two cavalry officers.

As the clock struck twelve, the front of the line was even, smooth and solid. Tossing heads, shiny manes and chests, and moving front legs of horses were all that was visible of the first wave of boomers as they swept forward.

"Boy, they never had anything like this in she days of the Roman chariot races," Fowler said soberly.

For one tense moment there was a dramatic pause. The prairie all about was silent and dusty. Then, as though a terrific explosion had been set off by the rifle shots, the horses moved past on either side of the knoll in a great thundering roar. The ground shook as though it were disturbed by a great earthquake.

When the first rush sped past, Clay Fowler almost automatically pulled out his watch and looked at it again. Swirls of dust were closing over him and landing upon his clothing and the back of his rangy dun. The watch said twelve-two.

In those one hundred and twenty seconds, between the time the first horse sped past and the last prairie schooner disappeared over the first rise below the Cherokee Border, history had been written. Already the area around them was marked by the splintered wrecks of half a dozen vehicles. The men in these wagons were picking themselves up. Some of their women folks, who were planning to follow more leisurely as the Neale wagons would do, now hurried forward to attend the hurts of their loved ones.

"That was excitement plus!" Fowler said. "You'd better head east and south, Laddy, and see how our boys are making out."

The corporal saluted crisply, touched spurs to his mount and galloped away in the wake of the horses, wagons and bicycles. Meanwhile an occasional cloud of smoke marked the route of the puffing locomotive.

"Well, Captain," Fowler asked, "how does it look?"

"It's a sight, all right," Larson said soberly. "But how come you haven't moved into action yet?"

For answer, Clay Fowler swept his arm off toward the north. He indicated the little clearing where he had seen Buck McGann, Pug Bates and the other land sharks camped early in the morning. From the signs visible through his field glasses, it appeared that the McGann crew was still there, and apparently oblivious to the excitement now going on below the Kansas border.

"I'm waiting for McGann's boys to move out," Fowler explained. "I have a hunch they're going to lead me into something."

"Not a bad idea," Larson agreed. Then, with Fowler and Norton, he turned to a survey of the action all about them. They were able to note more of the details of the run, now that their own physical bodies were in no danger from the rush.

The racers didn't seem to be off to a good start. All of the horses were well strung out now, and not all of those in the lead were horsemen. Some of the wagon outfits were making good. There was one gallant driver in a two wheel spring cart who was holding his own with the men on horseback.

This first group of boomers passed over the hill and out of sight even as they were watching, but with each movement of the wheeled vehicles, the watching trio expected to see them go over to smash the wheels to bits.

Those who were gambling on the speed of the engine, and had donated their money to the kitty in the peach basket, were undoubtedly disappointed at the beginning. Apparently neither engineer nor fireman, nor the town-siters and boomers aboard, had considered the weight of the load. The locomotive protested loudly and tooted incessantly, not only for a little power to break the grip of gravity and get the train moving, but also to warn out of the way horses who felt that the railroad roadbed might make a good racecourse.

"Looks as though Big Tim Brady is having trouble," Fowler laughed. "I'll bet that crew in those cattle cars are fit to be tied."

Finally, like a waddling old lady reaching a downhill stretch, the engine got under way. The excitement was audibly expressed by shouts from the men on the train, and punctuated by pistol shots.

"Now that they're on their way," Fowler declared, "I've got a hunch that the fellows on the train are going to have the best chance. After the first few miles, they'll be well in advance of the fastest horsemen."

"They'll be limited to the country on either side of the railroad track," Larson pointed out, "but that'll be some of the best farm country in the new district."

Lieutenant Norton broke in at this point and said:

"Looks like some of the bicycle boys are going to take the easy way." He pointed toward where several men on bicycles were heading out in leisurely fashion on the Texas stage trail. This route followed the general direction of the railroad track. This was not the only traffic on the stage trail. The route was undergoing one of the transitions that was periodically brought about by the advance of American history on the frontier.

Loaded freight wagons moved into the road in a steady stream. They had been up at Caldwell for several days, taking shipments from the rail-line, and transshipping them to their big high-wheeled wagons with their horse and ox-teams.

At noon this had been little more than a prairie trail that might have been traveled by Cherokee, Ponca and Tonkawa with their squaws and papooses and their horse-drawn travois. Now it went through a transition to become a couple of sandy ruts, and would soon blossom as a full-sprung highway.

It widened as people, unwilling to drive in the ruts, moved off on either side, and trampled down the grass and ground up the dirt. All of the people driving along the Texas trail were grimly determined and on business bent. This was no afternoon for pleasure, with the temperature at a hundred in the shade in a shadeless country, and a strong wind with all the heat of a furnace coming clear across the Indian Territory from Texas.

Clay Fowler finally brought his glance away from the railroad and the stage trail, and studied the terrain about him. Then he looked at Captain Larson and said:

"That old lady out there appears to be in trouble."

They all looked toward a spot on the prairie, barely a hundred yards from the Kansas line, where a woman in her early fifties was seated under a big sun umbrella, resting on a folding camp stool, and with all of her luggage about her.

The Missouri man cantered his rangy dun forward and dismounted alongside her.

"Can I be of service, ma'am?"

The old lady looked up at Fowler and smiled, then replied:

"I don't think so, Son. But thanks, anyway." Captain Larson and Lieutenant Norton were alongside, now, and the captain shook his head with a puzzled frown.

"Are you sure you're all right?" the officer inquired.

"Certainly," the woman declared. "Ma Dugan always makes out all right. This here land is open for homesteading, isn't it?"

"Of course," agreed the captain.

"It's right next to that fertile farmland in Kansas, isn't it, and a part of Payne's Creek runs through it, doesn't it?"

"I guess it does," replied the captain, a peculiar smile on his face as he saw what the merry old Irish lady was driving at.

"Then there's no reason why I should go traipsing all over the Indian Territory looking for a farm, is there? I'm at home right here, and I've got you fellows handy to make sure that no one puts me off."

"That's right, Ma," laughed Fowler, "and I guess you've taught some of these boomers a lesson. The greenest pastures aren't always those over the hill. Sometimes they're right here in front of your eyes. All of these people have been watching this strip of land for a month or more, but none of them figured to settle on it but you."

Wishing the old lady good luck, Fowler and the others promised to help her with the recording of her papers, and they returned to the cavalry camp.

As Fowler left his horse, he strolled over toward the Neale wagons. Now most of the vehicles that had been camped around them were gone, moved off into the Cherokee Outlet. Ma Neale was out in the rear of the wagons, knitting away as though she were at the foot of the guillotine in revolutionary France. She looked up as Fowler approached and asked:

"Did you see her? Did you see Marion?"

"I saw her," Fowler replied solemnly. "She looked like one of the Amazons. I'm sure she's making out all right. If you'd like to hitch up your wagons, and want me to help you with the thoroughbreds, I think we might start moving southward."

Mrs. Neale hadn't considered this, but she was a typical pioneer woman, and willing to accept any change that was demanded by circumstances. As she bustled around, Fowler asked:

"How's Silver Dollar?"

"He was up around noon for the big doings, but he's sleeping now. I think he's going to be all right. He's not the sort of a man who likes to be flat on his back."

"He won't be much help with his injured

shoulder," Fowler decided, "so we'd better plan to hobble the horses for the time being, then lead them behind the wagons when we get under way. Captain Larson is sending some men down to Enid; they'll go along with us."

Mrs. Neale prepared a stirrup snack for them to eat before setting out with the wagons. Larson's troopers came along at about one-thirty, and the camp site was cleared up in no time. The draught horses were hooked in, and the wagons loaded.

Silver Dollar Welch came out for the meal, and then insisted upon taking care of one of the wagons. Fowler readily agreed to this, since the horses would be driven at a walk.

Fowler saw that Lieutenant Paul Norton was in charge of the detail of troopers assigned to look after the land office in Enid the following day when the boomers would be coming in to file on their claims.

Mrs. Neale rode on the seat of the first wagon beside Clay Fowler, and they talked of the days back in Kentucky when Marion had been a small child, and her father had been fresh from the Civil War and its defeats.

Fowler realized then, if he hadn't known before, just how much the woman was wrapped up in her daughter. He couldn't blame her for that. The big wagon rumbled and creaked and groaned as they followed the Texas stage trail.

All about them there were signs of the aftermath of the run. The country was only three hours old, yet there was already a boomer on every square half-mile of land. Sometimes there were three or four men in the same quarter section, each one holding on to the butt of his gun, and waiting for his neighbor to lose courage, or call for a showdown.

"What's going to happen?" Mrs. Neale asked soberly. Fowler shook his head slowly, and replied:

"Some of the men will probably settle their difficulties on the spot in broad daylight. But I'm afraid most of them are going to have to be on the alert for night riders."

Mrs. Neale paled, probably at the thought of Marion out there alone. Clay Fowler brushed his fingers over her work-worn hands. His touch comforted her, and they continued their journey in silence.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when suddenly Mrs. Neale sniffed and then looked off to the right. She turned to Fowler and said:

"There's a prairie fire out there. We'll be trapped. How do you suppose that started?"

Clay's sensitive nose had discerned the smell of fire long before Mrs. Neale had gotten her first glimpse of it, but he had hoped that it would not menace their passage on the stage road. He replied:

"Some of the boys in the front line probably figured they could keep the other boomers from overtaking them if they set the prairie on fire. There's a strong head wind blowing up from the south, and it would take the fire right back to those who are coming up behind."

"What are we going to do?" Mrs. Neale asked, her practically operating mind taking command, now that her natural fear of fire had been dismissed.

"You take over the reins," Clay declared. "Just keep driving along this road. I'll mount up on the dun and ride over toward the fire and see what I can do about stopping it."

Fowler leaped over the high wheel at the right side of the big Conestoga, and hurried back toward the rear where the thoroughbreds were fastened with a series of halter ropes. Here he was able to see the really serious effects of the fire.

All horses are afraid of fire as a general rule, and these Kentucky animals were no exception. Silver Dollar Welch was looking back through the wagon he was driving, and talking crisply of the stupidity of the men who had set the flames.

Fowler swept his saddle out of the wagon, cinched it on the dun and mounted up. He eased his six-guns in the holsters, not knowing how desperate the fire-setters might be. Then he reined the animal to the side of the road and galloped off toward the west. Up ahead Mrs. Neale watched him go, and then took up her teamster's chores.

It was about a half-mile from the stage road to the edge of the fire. The air was filled with blowing ashes, some of them still scorching hot, and the stifling heat from the sun was raised fifteen or twenty degrees by the fire until both horse and man found difficulty breathing.

Very few of the boomers were seriously inconvenienced by the fire. Or perhaps they didn't realize the menace of the leaping flames. On the upland prairies where most of the fires had been started, the grass was thin, and it did not look as though the flames had taken hold at all.

However, prairie fires have a peculiar habit all their own, and that is the habit of smouldering. They will run through thin grass rather slowly, and will then creep ahead in long fingers of fire, to join up later on and frequently trap man or beast.

Clay hailed several groups of men, asking them to help him with a backfire, but they waved to him gaily, and went on their way.

Most of these men were on horseback, and it was a fairly simple task for them to pick the open spots and move about the burning stretches of ground. But the prairie schooners and freight wagons coming along behind had trouble. The horses were less spirited, and with the drag of the heavy wagons they were unable to dodge from side to side and avoid the spreading tongues of flame.

It was from this group that Fowler finally recruited a group of fire-fighters. He would have called upon Lieutenant Norton and the soldiers, but they would have their hands full keeping things in order on the road.

While working with the fire-fighters, Clay Fowler talked to several of them, and invariably his questions concerned Marion Neale. One of the men recalled seeing her, and said:

"She's moving along over west about two miles. She seems to know where she wants to go, and I have a hunch that she's going to make it all right."

This was cheering news, and when the immediate danger of the fire closing in on the stagecoach was forestalled, Clay Fowler decided to go in search of the girl. He thanked the men for their help, watched them going ahead on what was an almost hopeless quest, then cantered off on his own errand.

The next half-hour was something of a nightmare to him. The prairie fire that had burned across the crests of the prairie knolls was nothing but a relatively minor catastrophe. Clay Fowler soon come into an area that had once been thick, deep grass. This sloped down into open draws. Here a fire would travel at great speed, and would consume everything about it. Several prairie schooners which had taken the lower trail, in preference to forcing the horses up over the hills, had been caught in these pockets, and the vehicles had been burned.

Fowler came upon one badly burned family, looking down upon the wreckage of their belongings with dazed expressions. The capable Missouri man proved a good Samaritan, tending to their hurts, and telling them how they could salvage enough of their belongings to make a new start in this bleak country.

When he was finished with his ministrations, he asked about Marion Neale. A tired, worn-looking woman with stringy hair and a broken-spirited slump looked up at the man and said:

"Mister, you shouldn't never let a girl like that in this wild country alone. She's got plenty of spunk, and there's no doubting that, but she's riding right into hell."

"Where was she last?" Fowler asked quickly.

"Over west about two miles, I'd say," the woman replied. "I got a glimpse of her on a big gray gelding, just before we headed down into that burning hole there."

Clay Fowler nodded. He swung back aboard his dun, and continued his trek. As he jogged along, he saw a grim sight that sobered him. His Ranger horse, unattended, was standing on a knoll. Marion was nowhere in sight.

Something snapped inside the Missouri man. His stomach felt empty. He cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted:

"Marion! Marion! Where are you?"

He cocked his ear for a reply, but none was forthcoming. He repeated his shout, but again heard nothing. Fowler was almost frantic. His mind conjured up pictures of Marion thrown from Ranger's back into the midst of the prairie fire and her flaming red hair actually consumed by real flames.

Then he was conscious of hoof sounds nearby. He whirled around and gazed into the face of a grim horseman. The man held a rifle cocked in his hand, and he called:

"What are you doing here, stranger?"

Fowler studied the face of the rifleman, then replied soberly:

"I'm looking for a young girl who rode in with the boomers. What's up?"

"Justice!" the rifleman said firmly. He studied

Fowler for several moments and then motioned for him to follow along. As the dun dipped over the lip of a basin around a dried-up spring, Fowler caught sight of a cottonwood tree, and a rope flung over an extended limb.

For a moment the sickening thought occurred to Fowler that Marion might have persisted in her masquerade as a boy; and these rough frontiersmen might have hanged her for some fancied infraction of their code with which she would be completely unfamiliar.

One glance, however, satisfied Fowler that he did not know the cottonwood apple dangling from the tree with a sign on his chest reading: "Too Soon!"

"You reckon we done right?" the rifleman asked.

Clay Fowler shook his head slowly, then replied:

"It's rough on his throat, but I figure he had it coming. Gun law is one kind of law, but rope law is another."

"Good philosophy, friend," the rifleman declared. Several of the horsemen about the cottonwood tree looked up at Fowler. Then, their work completed, they mounted their horses and rode off toward the south. The rifleman was the last to go, and he called back over his shoulder to Clay Fowler:

"Good luck, Mister."

Fowler nodded, but his mind was still racing with worry at the fate of Marion Neale.

CHAPTER 12

Clay Fowler dismounted then, and led his horse over to the water hole to give him a drink. The hole was little more than a mud spot, but after a bit of digging with the small shovel on his saddle roll, Fowler managed to bring up enough water for a good filling drink.

Then he started back up the slope on foot, to catch up the Ranger horse before continuing his search for Marion Neale. He was approaching the big gray gelding when suddenly a familiar musical voice called:

"Clay! Clay!"

Fowler whirled around, hardly able to believe his ears. Then he called:

"Marion! What happened to you?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," the girl said breathlessly. "I was scared for a moment, but now I'm all right. I ran into this, just as they were hanging that man. I didn't know why they were hanging him, or who they were. I thought sure that if they caught me, I'd be their next victim. So I left Ranger and hid in the deep grass. I saw you ride up, and I heard you call, but I decided that you'd stand a better chance by yourself and without me to worry about.

Seems as though you made out all right." There was a note of relief in her last words.

She leaned up against Clay Fowler excitedly; then he said:

"I figure the hombre who's cottonwood fruit had it coming to him."

"Why?" Marion asked.

"He was a sooner," Fowler explained.

"How could they know that?" Marion inquired. "I don't see just what would tell them."

"It's pretty simple," Fowler told her. "He was in here, miles from the Kansas line, and without a horse or any other kind of a conveyance. He certainly couldn't walk here in the time it took other men to ride, now could he?"

"I guess not."

"Did you find a nice place for your own homestead?" Fowler asked. "Or are you going on?"

Marion Neale made a peculiar grimace, half of distaste, and half of uncertainty, before replying:

"I don't know whether I've found a place or not. I thought this would be an ideal spot, but now I'll always see those rough men riding in and hanging that fellow from the tree. I don't know whether I'd like it or not."

"You're going to see lots of soul-searing things in this wild country," Fowler told her.

"If this spot suits your purpose, by all means move in on it. You mount up on Ranger, and head east for the stage road. When you get to it, turn south and overtake your wagons. Bring them back here. By the time you reach here, I'll have this fellow attended to."

Marion hesitated for a few moments, until Fowler said:

"If you don't get going, you'll never have the folks here before dark. You'd better get a move on."

The girl finally agreed, and mounted up and galloped away. Clay watched her out of sight, then went around to check the location notices and make certain that Marion had left her flags and papers properly. This matter settled, he cut down the hanged man, and buried him under a rock pile in a buffalo burrow some distance away.

About two hours later when Marion arrived with the two wagons, her mother, Silver Dollar Welch and the horses, there was no sign of the incident that had taken place there.

Settled on the land they fervently hoped would be their future home, the Neales appeared to gain new spirit, and they worked with a will to get up their tent structures that would have to serve until they could hire the men to erect more permanent dwellings, and until Silver Dollar Welch could take a more active part in their construction.

Shortly after dark, Clay Fowler checked over everything in the vicinity, warned the women and their protector about possible trouble, and then went to saddle Ranger. He planned to leave the dun with them until a later visit.

"Can't you possibly stay tonight?" Marion asked.

"I'd like to," Clay told her, "but I'm out after a piece of land, too. Laddy Graham is probably holding it down for me, and I've got to help him. You'll make out all right."

Marion understood, but nevertheless she decided to ride a little way with Clay. The Missouri man was glad to have her along. When they were some distance away from the Neale camp, Marion said:

"Maybe you think I'm foolish, Clay, but I'm still going to find the man who was responsible for killing my father."

Fowler nodded soberly, and said:

"I know just how you feel. My father was killed in a raid in Missouri by Quantrill's raiders. They were men who had grown up in the grim days of the Civil War, then went on with their lawlessness afterward. I never found the man responsible for his death. But vengeance isn't always what it's cracked up to be. Why don't you leave it up to the law?"

Marion Neale bristled, and asked:

"What kind of law does Oklahoma know?"

"Gun law," Fowler said soberly. "Federal gun law! But your father wasn't killed in Oklahoma. He was killed in Kansas."

"My father may have been killed in the confines of the state of Kansas," Marion said soberly, "but he was killed as a part of the dirty plotting for land in the Cherokee Outlet. His death was a part of the pattern of murder and pillage in this country. I'm going to show his soul that I'm a worthy daughter."

"Build up your farm, first," Fowler advised. "Make it a monument to the memory of your father; then you'll find that it'll be much easier to find the master mind behind these land grafters. Marion Neale of the Neale horse farms will be a much more important figure in the Indian Territory than Marion Neale, vagabond."

The girl recognized the truth of this, and she halted her horse. She waved good-by to him, and then called out:

"When will we be seeing you again?"

"Perhaps sooner than you expect," was all the comfort Clay Fowler could give her. Then he lengthened the stride of his Ranger horse, and began to plunge through the night. As he approached the stage road, he saw that there was still a good deal of traffic, even though night was upon them. The wagons were moving along with bobbing lanterns fastened on the axles, making spots of light in the darkness of the prairie.

Ranger crossed the stage road, then slowed down for the railroad track, and scampered over the rails without incident. On the eastern side of the track, Clay Fowler took his bearings by the stars, and then set out for a beeline ride toward the stretch of terrain Laddy Graham was planning to homestead.

Several times he saw huddled figures on the prairie, and knew that they were boomers wrapped in their blankets and sleeping out the night. Now and then the Missouri man saw some men strolling about on the alert, determined that no one would bluff them off the ground they had worked so hard to get. Once or twice these men grew suspicious of Clay and expressed themselves with gunfire over his head.

"Best to detour around those hombres, Ranger boy," Fowler told his horse, and proceeded to do so. It was well after midnight when he finally came to the upper waters of Red Rock Creek. He was moving along the creek bank, expecting to find Graham's camp close by, when suddenly he heard a whisper. He paused, and a low whistle came to his ears.

"Laddy?" Fowler voiced the name in a husky whisper.

"Clay!" There was relief in the corporal's calling of his name. Then the grizzled veteran of the Indian campaigns in the Southwest loomed up alongside the Missouri man's horse, and gripped his hand.

"Light down and keep quiet," Laddy told him. Clay Fowler followed instructions, and the cavalry corporal led the mount away into the darkness. Fowler awaited the fellow's return, in the meantime trying to figure out what was wrong.

The heavens displayed a multitude of stars, and the bowl of the sky was like a great inverted chandelier. But all around them on both sides of the meandering creek that finally made its way to the Arkansas River over in the Osage and Pawnee country was complete darkness.

These sights didn't interest most of the boomers. The first excitement was past, and they were more than willing to roll in their blankets and rest for the demands of the coming day, the first Sunday in their new homes.

Finally Laddy Graham came back, and hunched down in the shelter of some willows close by Clay Fowler.

"What's up?" Fowler asked. "Have any trouble?"

"Plenty," Graham declared in a husky whisper. "You know when I headed out, right after the first rush. I figured on moving over in here, because I didn't think many of the boomers would want to swim the Arkansas, especially this far east. The Salt Fork can be pretty tough at times. But when I got down here, there were a parcel of skunks up on the hill, and their horses weren't even sweated. They're sooners, or I'm a Chinaman."

"Don't go talking about your ancestors," Fowler said jovially, hoping to calm down his saddle partner. "How many of them are there?"

"Six of them," Graham reported. "They're camped up on top of the hill, and they've just about bracketed all the choice land, including the grazing land, the wooded area and the mountain slopes where I figured we might build our ranch house. It's a hell of a note that one of Uncle Sam's soldiers not only has to fight for his country, but also for a piece of it to live on."

Fowler weighed this information, then said:

"If they've moved in, and are sooners, I think we can handle them, whether they happen to be six or sixty. Let's get a good night's sleep, and we'll look things over in the morning. Sometimes these problems look different at daybreak."

Laddy Graham had no other suggestion of his own to make, so he readily returned to his blankets, and before long both men were asleep.

Clay Fowler went to sleep facing east, knowing that the first streaks of dawn, thrusting fingers of light up over the horizon, would be sure to fall on his face, and shake him out of dreamland. He was stirring at a little before six, and a cold wash in the waters of Red Rock Creek erased all traces of his midnight ride.

He roused Laddy Graham, who leaped from his blankets with his gun in hand, and when he had quieted the old campaigner, Fowler said:

"Stand by here. I'm going up to visit our neighbors."

Fowler set out, but before he had gone more than a hundred yards, he made an interesting discovery. The location markers of the land preempted by the sooners were about three hundred feet from Red Rock Creek. The papers had been deposited in them, and marker flags were waving at the corners.

The Missouri man hurried back to the camp in the willows and startled Laddy Graham. Then he asked:

"Have you been over on the other side of the creek?"

"No," Laddy replied. "Why?"

"Where are your location flags and corner markers?"

"Right over there in my duffle," Graham declared. "What are you going to do now?"

"Looks as though our friends up on the hill made a tactical error," Fowler replied cryptically. "Maybe we can steal a march on them."

Fowler located Ranger in the copse of undergrowth where Graham had hidden him during the night, and with the location flags and corner marker papers in his possession, he splashed across the creek and set forth on his important mission. He took down the number, section, township and range, all the information necessary for filing papers in Enid, and then returned to camp.

Now and then the two old campaigners looked up on the hill, but there was no stirring from the other camp. Clay Fowler worked to fill out his necessary papers, then said to Laddy:

"I think I have everything in order here. You take these documents. Ride into Enid with them and file them. Captain Larson or Lieutenant Norton will be there. Tell them about the sooner situation over here, and maybe they'll be willing to send out a troop. I'll hold things in hand until they get here."

Laddy Graham didn't like the idea of deserting his saddle pard under fire. He protested the orders of his comrade, but Clay Fowler laughed and said:

"The enemy has made a serious strategic blunder. If the sun comes out today, as it has been coming out every day for the past month, then we ought to be able to force them into a tactical retreat."

"How's that?" Graham was still skeptical.

"Nothing much," Fowler said, "except that with all the time they had to set up their stakes and file their notices, they didn't stake the creek. The water is the life of this country out here, and without it, all the choice grazing land on the hill, the wooded area, and the mountain slopes isn't worth the price of a single head of sheep. Get going, Laddy. We're going to back up gun law with paper law."

Graham realized what had happened now, and immediately set about saddling his mount, and folding the important legal documents into a waterproof pouch he carried beneath his blue military blouse.

When he was on his way, Fowler turned back to finish his meal. Then, unfolding his blanket roll, he took out a new Winchester, and rubbed it with a touch of pride. He worked the lever carefully, and brought out a supply of cartridges from his pocket. He filled the magazine, tried the action again, then put the gun back into the blanket roll, and covered the roll with some cut branches Graham had been using as a bed.

Clay then turned his attention to his six-guns, and after they were cleaned and loaded, he filled the loops on his crossed gun belts.

"Now," he chuckled, "I guess I'm ready for my visit."

Fowler intended to walk up the hill, and therefore he substituted a pair of hand-made moccasins for his riding boots. These not only made walking more comfortable, but would permit him to close in upon his adversaries without arousing immediate alarm.

Fowler got within twenty yards of the fire around which the six sooners were seated, having their breakfast, before anyone looked up to spot him standing there.

When one fellow did look up, the surprise on the faces of Fowler and the sooner was mutual. The Missouri man found himself facing Pecos Porter, the man he had met during his ride with Kitty Trotter, two days before.

"Hello, Fowler," Porter greeted him coolly. "Come in and join us. Did you hoof it all the way out here?"

"Not exactly," Fowler replied. "Just came over here from my own place farther down the line."

Pecos Porter was silent for a moment. His eyes roamed beyond Fowler, and studied the surrounding cover, as though he expected to see

Laddy Graham somewhere in sight. But nothing stirred. Fowler knew that he was at an advantage as long as Porter and his men did not realize that Graham was already heading for Enid, and that Fowler was facing him alone.

CHAPTER 13

If Clay Fowler had suspected Pecos Porter of being the down-and-outer Kitty Trotter had said, now he knew that Porter was an important lieutenant in the organization that was trying to take over the Cherokee Outlet and turn its valuable lands to a clique.

But none of these suspicions appeared on Fowler's face as he settled down beside Porter, and reached a wooden fork for a strip of bacon.

Conversation was slack during the first half-hour, while the men concluded their meal, and also tried to determine Fowler's position with relation to them. Finally Porter asked:

"What took you so long getting in here?"

"I figure I got here soon enough," Fowler remarked soberly.

Porter laughed loudly, then studied the other tough-looking men in his coterie and replied:

"Maybe you got here soon enough, but we got here *sooner!* Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"That's all a matter of opinion," Fowler declared. "Have you made arrangements to file your papers in Enid?"

"Sure thing," Porter told him, apparently enjoying what he hoped would be the discomfiture of his companion. "One of the boys rode in with the papers yesterday afternoon. We'll own this place all legal and aboveboard come morning."

Clay was glad to find Porter so complacent. He felt that with this attitude, the man would be a much easier adversary, and if Fowler could keep him in this mood until Graham made the thirty-mile round trip to Enid, then things would go off much more smoothly.

Porter, seeking for a reason for Fowler's reticence, believed it might have something to do with past events.

"Figuring on bringing Kitty Trotter out here?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Fowler replied. "Kitty Trotter doesn't happen to be as important in my life as you seem to think she is."

"That's what I always say," Porter agreed. "Women are all right for amusement, but it's foolish to tie yourself down to one of them. Maybe if you weren't out riding all around southern Kansas with Kitty, or trying to make that Neale girl back on Payne's Creek, you could have beaten us in here. Then you'd be sitting pretty on a nice choice piece of property."

Fowler nodded his head slowly. He leaned back against the bole of a tree about twenty yards from the fire, and rolled himself a quirley. Then he offered his Durham and papers to Porter and asked:

"You hooked up with Buck McGann?"

Pecos Porter stiffened at mention of the name of the land grafter. Several of the other men in the vicinity looked at their leader with veiled eyes, their hands caressing their gun butts.

"Buck McGann?" Porter repeated. "I don't think I savvy the gent. Who's he?"

"Some tricky-looking hombre I met up in Carter's place on Payne's Creek. He was decked out in a black gambler's outfit, with a white shirt and a string tie. Looked as though he fancied himself as a dude, and had plenty of gun hung waddies to side him."

"This here is a big world," Porter said sagely, "and I ain't got around to meeting up with all the gents in black fork-tail coats. What give you the idee I might be a saddle pard of this McGann hombre?"

"Maybe you are, and maybe you ain't," Fowler dismissed the matter solemnly. "But if it's not McGann you're hooked up with, then who are you working for?"

Porter's attitude changed almost instantly. He scrabbled to his feet and his gun whipped up out of his holster. But Clay Fowler wasn't "caught setting," either. He was prepared for the reaction of his opponent, and his knees straightened like springs, and pushed him upward with his back against the tree.

One of Porter's six-shooters was in his fist, the muzzle pointing toward the ground. Porter was again on the defensive, and he realized it. Fowler had placed the other five men in an arc before him, and the weaving muzzle of his gun indicated that any one of the sextette might be the first victim.

"I'm doing my own dirty work," Porter insisted. "And I don't like any hombre who has a hankering to be too nosy. We don't have to come to lead-swapping for you to understand that. I'm telling you where I stand, and I'm hoping you'll be smart enough to pull out. Maybe you can gun down one or two of us with them smart smokepoles of yours, but we're bound to salivate you in the end."

There was a lot of truth in this, and Clay Fowler had no intention of forcing the issue. Porter's reaction was enough to tell Fowler that there was a man higher up, someone who apparently pulled the strings for both McGann and Porter; and perhaps other killer bands throughout the Cherokee Strip and the Indian Territory.

"Okay, Porter," Fowler said calmly. "No hard feelings. But when you do come up with this big boss of yours, tell him he's bucking gun law in Cherokee country, and he's likely to come off second best." Then to show his contempt for the six gunmen, he slid his gun back into its holster and strode right through the group and out into the open.

The very audacity of the move guaranteed its success. Before any one of the men could recover, Fowler was beyond effective six-gun range, and zigzagging down the hill.

He reached his camp in the willows without incident, and sheltered himself under a tarpaulin from the hot September sun. Then he brought out his Winchester, checked it carefully, and set it down alongside of him.

Fowler lay down to rest, knowing that from now on he would probably have to maintain a vigil day and night until he had tricked Porter out of the land the Texan had gained by treachery.

Nothing happened until the morning had drifted by, and the sun was already passing its zenith. Now and then Clay Fowler came up on his elbow to look off toward the southwest, the direction from which Laddy Graham would be coming on his ride back from Enid. But Clay was not too sanguine about Laddy's early return.

Suddenly, just about noon, Fowler heard a clanking sound, and looked up to see the Porter cook coming down the hill with a couple of canteens and a boiler in his arms. Fowler kept an eye on him until he passed the monuments marking the border of the Porter property; then he pushed up on his elbows and called:

"Hey, cookie! What are you doing down here?"

The Porter cook whirled around and looked into the willows. Then, seeing nothing to arouse his suspicions, he said:

"I'm going for water. What's it to you?"

"Why don't you get your water on your own property? This water along here belongs to me and my pardner. We've filed on it legally in Enid. Sashay out of here, and take your water buckets with you."

The cook hesitated for a fraction of a moment. Then an idea seemed to strike him, and he lifted his apron and said:

"Take a gander, Mister. I ain't toting no shooting iron. You wouldn't want to shoot me in cold blood, would you? The boys are thirsty, and they've got to have water."

Fowler studied the cookie to make sure he wasn't sporting a hide-out gun; then he called out:

"Your boss, Pecos Porter, should have thought about drinking water. You're not toting any of my water up the hill."

With this warning, Clay Fowler looked around and made certain that his position in the willows was safe from any flanking movement. Then he leveled his Winchester. The cook ran the last few yards to the bank of Red Rock Creek and dipped his canteens and water bucket into the cool waters. One filled canteen was laid aside while the cook worked with the other one and the water boiler.

"Brang!" went the Winchester as Fowler squeezed off a shot aimed at the canteen. The filled water container jumped a foot, and when it came down again, it was pierced from one side to the other and the fresh water was spouting out in a twin geyser.

The cookie jumped even higher than the water canteen, although he wasn't bullet-prodded. He swung around with the second canteen, half full of the precious fluid, and another blast from the Winchester tore an opening in the sides of this, too.

That was enough for the old-timer. He abandoned the bucket completely, and with the two bullet-ripped canteens he rushed back up the hill.

Clay Fowler knew that as soon as the explanation of the shooting reached Pecos Porter and his men the Fowler claim would be placed under siege. But whether this would result in immediate open hostilities, the Missouri man had no way of knowing.

Fifteen minutes went by, during which Fowler improved the time by reloading his Winchester, and moving wood around him from a pile that Graham had cut during the previous afternoon. Thus bulwarked, Clay Fowler was ready for the next round in his bout with Porter and his henchmen.

It came about three o'clock in the afternoon.

This time it was Pecos Porter himself who started down the hill with a big canteen. This container would hold two or three gallons of water. Judging from the dogged manner in which he made his advance, things weren't going so well up on the slope. Apparently the boys had run out of all the spirituous liquor they had brought in, and their mouths were now developing an inner coating of cotton that could only be cut by fresh spring water.

As soon as he reached the land monument that marked the end of his property, Pecos Porter halted. Clay Fowler leveled his rifle and said:

"That's clear thinking, Porter. You get near that water, and you'll find a slug of lead in your hide. I ain't going easy on you like I did with the cook. You're packing a six-gun, and you know how to use it."

"Take it easy," Porter said. "The boys are plumb eaten up with thirst. We've got to have water. Them horses are going crazy, too. We'll have to cut them loose, and let them stampede right down here to the creek."

"It ain't a case of taking things easy," Fowler told him. "This is justice that's catching up with you. It ain't no worry of mine, if you decide to die of thirst. I hear it ain't a pleasant death. They say you shrivel up inside, and don't know what's happening to you."

Pecos Porter studied Fowler's position. Then he slung the canteen over his shoulder, and his hand tigthened around the six-gun at his hip. Fowler sensed that this speech on the part of Porter was intended to cover the approach of other gunmen. With this thought in mind, Clay studied the terrain about him, and suddenly spotted one of the gunhawks moving in from about fifty feet away.

Continuing to talk to Porter, Fowler switched the muzzle of his Winchester, and pressed the trigger.

"Ye-ow-wowow!" came a shout from the skulking ambusher. The bullet kicked up the dirt before him, and drove gravel and bits of lead into his cheeks. The man jumped to his feet like a huge frog suddenly walking upright, and dashed away up the hill.

"I don't like tricks," Fowler said calmly. "Now you, Porter, take your tin water can there, and beat it back up the hill, or I'll send some dust kicking at your feet." Porter turned around slowly, uncertainly.

Clay Fowler took careful aim, leveled his rifle at the heel of Porter's riding boot, and pulled trigger. There was a loud "bra-a-a-nng!" Then the heavy Winchester slug struck the heel of Porter's Justin, and threw the outlaw off balance. He tried to straighten up, but without the heel to support him, he went over backward and fell to the ground heavily. The canteen jumped out of his hand, caromed into the creek and clattered against the half submerged stones.

Pecos Porter didn't wait to recover it. Hopping along because of his damaged boot, he made his way back up the hill.

Another two hours went by; the sun was now moving off toward the West, and a night's rest in the skies beyond the Cimarron and the Canadian. Porter had decided that the water situation was so bad that it justified a sally in force. All six of the gunmen in the camp formed a half-circle around Fowler's position, and came down upon him like descending vultures upon a crippled antelope.

"This here is your last chance to sashay." Porter yelled loudly. "I'm giving you a chance to pull out with a whole skin."

"A whole skin, is it?" Fowler returned defiantly. "If you try to go near this creek, none of you will have a whole skin; and they tell me that it's hard to keep drinking water, if you don't have one. You'd be leaking just like one of cookie's canteens."

There was something of bluff in Fowler's reply, and he hoped fervently that it would work. He knew that if all six men closed in upon him with flaming weapons it would be impossible for him to hold them off.

The sooners approached within easy six-gun distance; then one of the men on Porter's flank started shooting. His bullets were wild, and Fowler didn't take them too seriously, deciding they were a decoy. Sure enough, when he whirled around to face the man at the opposite end of the arc, Fowler saw the fellow, standing erect and running forward at top speed.

Fowler's Winchester came up carefully. He squeezed trigger. The man was smashed in the shoulder and spun around like a top, finally sprawling on his back. Almost before the man fell, the Missouri scout was twisting back to watch the others. One of them opened fire from about forty feet away, and pistol bullets began whipping against the kindling wood and logs that formed his fortification.

One of them drove splinters into his face, and he brought up his arm to shield his eyes. This threw his Winchester out of line, and Porter cried out:

"Now we've got him. Close in."

Fowler crouched lower in his cover, leveled his rifle at Pecos Porter and squeezed off a shot. Porter's gun twisted from his fingers, and he came up short as he gripped his numbed hand. Fowler's snap shot had smashed the firing mechanism of the sooner leader's six-gun.

Then there was an unexpected fusillade of shots from the other side of the creek. Fowler was as much surprised by this interruption as the Porter crew was. But it was one of the sooners who explained matters.

"It's the yellow-legs, Pecos. We'd better get out of here."

"Don't start going anywhere," come the raucous shout of Laddy Graham, "or we'll shoot you down on the run."

Porter and his surviving men were glad to accept this order. They dropped their guns and turned around to face Fowler and his newly arrived reinforcements.

The Missouri man now had a chance to survey the cohorts his pardner had brought with him. He saw that they included Lieutenant Pau Norton and a troop of the cavalry.

Norton greeted him pleasantly and said:

"You look as though you've been doing all right."

"Up to now," Fowler admitted, "but I was just about to send up the smoke signals for help. Porter isn't a bad general, when he gets a second guess. Most good generals never get a chance at that, though."

"Right," agreed Norton. Then he crossed to Porter and said: "We've been hearing about you in Enid. The man you sent in to file your papers is in custody, and is being sent north to Fort Hays. They've got a hanging court-martial up there. Maybe you'd like to go along with him."

Porter's hand went to his throat as though he could already feel the rough manila or hemp pressing on his Adam's apple. Then he cried:

"You have nothing against me. Nothing at all."

Norton looked toward Fowler for some help. Clay Fowler studied the cowering man before him, shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"He won't be of any help. Let him go."

"Okay," Lieutenant Norton ordered. "Get out of the Cherokee Outlet and the rest of Oklahoma and stay out. We're sending your record to all the frontier posts. If you're picked up by the cavalry again, it'll be Fort Hays for you."

Pecos Porter hesitated for a moment. Then, ignoring the cavalry officer, he turned to Fowler and said:

"We're going. But it's going to be a sad day for you. This news is going to get around, and we'll see that you don't have a peaceful day in the Cherokee country."

"That won't do me any harm," Fowler told him grimly. "I figured on bringing gun law into Oklahoma, and I've done it for you. I'll be sleeping with one eye open, and a cocked gun in my hand."

"That won't be enough to save you," Porter declared bitterly.

Clay Fowler shrugged, then replied: "That sounds like something that would come from the dirty mouth of a back-shooting coyote. Is that your stripe?"

Pecos Porter snarled. Beaten in the exchange of words, as he had been in the gunplay, he hurried off with his men, toward where they had left their horses up on the hill.

A few minutes later soldiers and scout watched them gallop off toward the north.

CHAPTER 14

Lieutenant Norton and his men camped for the night. Instead of remaining down by the creek, however, they moved up on the hill to the Porter clearing, and Laddy Graham went around to change the claim notices in the monuments so that they would conform with the papers filed in Enid for the two adjacent homesteads: one registered in his name, and the other for Clay Fowler.

Over the evening meal, Fowler and the soldiers discussed the day's events in Enid.

"The place was sure hopping, even for a Sunday," Laddy Graham said enthusiastically. "There wasn't much real business being done today, most folks figuring that tomorrow would see the place in action. Everyone's getting to call it the Big Town. Looks like the surveyors made a mistake, though."

Lieutenant Norton and the regular cavalry troopers laughed at this.

"How's that?" Fowler asked in some surprise.

"Well," Laddy explained, "when you have a railroad running through a country, you'd figure that the station ought to be in a town, but nothing doing. Them Government rod and chain boys, they laid out the town site just about a mile away. The only thing down by the railroad is the station and the water tank."

"That's pretty good," laughed Fowler.

"I'd hate to get there in the middle of the night," Laddy declared emphatically. "There isn't a light anywhere near the station or the water tank, and if you happen to get off the train, you're just as likely to stumble off into the prairie as to head in the direction of the town."

"How big is the place?" the Missouri man inquired.

"Well," Graham was figuring, "they expect it to have about five thousand people by tomorrow morning. But as one old codger there told me, the population is varying pretty rapid. They got the post office rigged up in a tent. Comanche Carter is moving in with his saloon and dance hall, and some enterprising fellow has rigged himself a tent hotel; boy by the name of Heyward, or something of the kind."

"How's the eats?" Clay Fowler wanted to know, realizing that Enid would be a base of operations for him, since he would have to freight in building materials and supplies, if the new land project was to pay any real dividends.

"Well," Laddy declared, "Captain Larson and the boys took me over to Heyward's place, and he served up boiled beef and potatoes for dinner. A working man can't ask for no more than that."

"That's right," Lieutenant Norton said. "And there are other signs of healthy activity, too. There's one place where a gent has nothing more than a safe and a sign. I don't suppose there's much in the safe yet, but the sign reads, *The Times,* and the old boy is going to run himself a newspaper right there. They're even opening up a Real Estate and Loan office there."

"I reckon the business at the land office is plumb inspiring, though," Fowler declared.

"Boy, oh, boy," Laddy Graham burst out, "that's the most bustling spot in the whole town. Did they count the folks on that line, Enid would have a population of thirty thousand, instead of five. That's a center of activity all its own. Boomers from all over the area are coming in to file their claims. Most folks think that with all the disputing going on, the first one in to file a claim will be recorded."

"Sure is stirring, all right," Lieutenant Norton agreed. "We're using the soldiers to keep the men in line, and yesterday morning the line was already stretched out onto the prairie for two miles or more. I reckon some of the boys on the end of the line will be waiting until sometime tomorrow night, or even Tuesday morning, and folks will be coming in all the time."

"You have any trouble, Laddy?"

"Not a bit," Graham replied, looking at Clay Fowler curiously. "You got some kind of magic in your name?"

"Magic?" Fowler repeated. "How do you mean?"

"Captain Larson took my papers and the papers belonging to the Neales, and went up to talk to the land agent to have them recorded. First off he wasn't too anxious to do it on Sunday, but then Larson told him it was for Clay Fowler, and the old mossback changed his tune right away. I never saw the beat of it."

"Maybe it's because I'm a personal friend of Grover Cleveland's," Fowler laughed.

"Grover Cleveland?" Laddy said in amazement. "You mean the president?"

"The same gent. I spoke to him just before I came out to Kansas. Next time I see him I'll put in a good word for you."

Night closed in about the homestead on Red Rock Creek, and the soldiers and their friends made camp. After the sleeping arrangements were discussed, and Laddy and Fowler were alone in their own tent, he asked the old corporal about Marion Neale and how she had made out with her mother.

"They seem to be getting along all right out there," Graham told him. "She figures they'll be able to bring herdsmen and carpenters down from Kansas, and to go ahead in a big way."

"Any trouble on the claim Saturday night?" Fowler asked.

"Not a thing," Graham assured him.

During the days that followed, Clay Fowler organized the arrangements on his homestead, at the same time conscious of the fact that he had a job to do. He made several trips to Enid, and had lumber and other supplies sent out, to complement the timber that could be cut from their own land. They did not want to clear off all the trees, because they would be important in supplying shade, as a wind break, and for erosion control.

When the first buildings were up, and other matters were well on their way, Fowler and Graham sat together in the kitchen of the new ranch house. It was a conservative dwelling with four rooms on one floor and a peaked attic overhead.

"We've got to move some stock in here, if we're going to make it support us," Fowler pointed out. "I've ordered some things from up Kansas way, and they ought to be coming into Enid at any time. In the meantime, though, there are several things that I'd like to do down south."

"Such as?"

"Well," Fowler replied, "the Cherokees have some fine beef cattle, and they're used to the type of grazing we have in this country. I think I'll head down for a powwow with old Chief Barbed Arrow, and see what's stirring."

Fowler saddled up Ranger, rolled his pack, and headed southward. He stopped in Enid long enough to talk to Captain Larson. The cavalry had a barracks on the edge of town, and now that the rush of registering land claims had slowed down somewhat, the soldiers found themselves back in their old routine.

The Missouri man tied his horse to a hitch-rack in front of the captain's office, and high-heeled into the room. Larson looked up from a paper-cluttered desk and smiled.

"Hello, Fowler, getting itchy feet again?"

"In a manner of speaking," Clay replied. "It's just that this job I came out on doesn't seem to be shaping up as rapidly as I thought it would. Have you been keeping an eye on Carter and his crew? And what about Buck McGann?"

"The men are in and out of Carter's place all the time," Larson declared. "Lieutenant Norton is a pretty smart young lad, and I've had him sifting the reports that come in from time to time. But there's nothing except the usual reports of brawls and fisticuffs. Carter is doing a careful job, if he's the boy you're after."

"And nothing about McGann?" Fowler urged.

"No," Larson replied. "Like you know, he stayed up in Kansas until after the run started. Then he and some of the boys rode through here two days later, heading south. No complaints have come in about his activities."

"They wouldn't," Fowler said soberly. "He's a tricky gent. After Pecos Porter was thrown off my claim and a couple of his men ventilated by gun lead, McGann probably decided to let his other plan work out."

"What was that?" Larson inquired.

"Those options he bought up," Fowler replied. "The deal he was working on when Colonel Neale was killed. Folks won't be able to turn over their property to him until they've complied with the law as far as putting up buildings, bringing in live stock and planting crops are concerned. That'll be sometime next year. But McGann and his cohorts will be rolling in money then."

"If you don't do something in the meantime," Larson said soberly.

"Right," agreed Fowler crisply. "Well, I'm heading down into the Cherokee country. Got a date with Chief Barbed Arrow."

Fred Larson's eyes narrowed. He tapped the desk with a pencil he was holding in his hand,

and said:

"Glad to hear you're heading that way. But keep your eyes open."

Fowler pricked up his ears, like a fire horse listening for the first sound of the gong, and asked:

"Why?"

"There's something stirring down in the Cherokee and Creek country. I've reports on it from the Army post over east. No one can put a finger on the sore spot. But you know enough about Indian character to realize that when talk begins to spread, there's action boiling up, too."

"I'll keep it in mind," Fowler declared. Then he waved good-by, and headed out of the office.

Up aboard Ranger, he gigged the animal southward on the Texas stage trail, kneed over to the east and cantered off.

CHAPTER 15

Clay Fowler's route paralleled the railroad for most of the distance to the Cimarron River north of Kingfisher. Here he headed east along the north bank of the river, and finally he spotted the buildings of the community set up by Chief Barbed Arrow. Originally the chief had selected this site because it made it possible for the Indians to deal with the big trail herds coming up from Texas.

Barbed Arrow's band was one of the hunting bands of the Cherokees, who originally used the Cherokee Outlet to get into the open country west of the railroads for their cattle trading and buffalo hunting. They included some of the best of the Cherokee braves.

Fowler arrived at the camp late in the afternoon. Even before he approached it, however, he knew that something unusual was under way. The camping area around the permanent buildings was brown with tents. The hunting band had been augmented by several hundred red brothers, and they were not only of the Cherokee tribe, but also of the Ponca, Tonkawa, Creek and Kiowa.

The Missouri man raised his right hand in the universal sign of peace. One of the Cherokee braves met him at the edge of the camp, and Fowler said:

"How, red brother. Clay Fowler would talk to the Chief Barbed Arrow."

The Indian replied rapidly in his native tongue. Fowler slipped off his horse, hunched his hips to set his six-guns, then, leaving Ranger ground-hitched, strode off behind the Cherokee.

They passed through a number of groups of braves, some of them watching squaws who were busy with the evening meal. He heard mutterings about him, some of them sharp and brutal. Now and then a finger of chill dread ran up and down his spine. Was he walking into a hostile camp?

Finally, in the very center of the camp, where there was a large open clearing around a log cabin, Clay Fowler spied Chief Barbed Arrow. The chief was seated on a bench, and clad in his ceremonial regalia. He looked up as Fowler and his guide approached. He recognized the Indian scout at once, and the wrinkles on his old face appeared to spread, as though he were trying to grin.

"Greetings, Chief Barbed Arrow," Fowler said, knowing that the chief was one of the most highly educated of the Cherokees. "I come on a peaceful errand, yet find the Cherokees and their neighbors trampling down the prairie grass and muttering in anger. Am I not welcome here?"

Chief Barbed Arrow rocked from side to side in a characteristic motion. One of his councillors bent over and spoke something to him. Then Chief Barbed Arrow paused and said:

"Clay Fowler is always welcome here. He has the confidence of the Great White Father in Washington. Perhaps he can advise us."

Fowler knew that he was in a position to do the settlers in Oklahoma a great deal of good. But if he said the wrong thing, and aroused the ire of Chief Barbed Arrow, then the results would be quite different.

Finally he remarked:

"Clay Fowler is surprised to find warriors from the Ponca, Tonkawa, and Kiowa tribe living in camp with his Cherokee brothers."

"Why?" asked Chief Barbed Arrow impassively.

"Barbed Arrow knows that the Poncas, Tonkawas, Creeks and Kiowas have had great difficulty with the men of General Sheridan and General Miles, because of their raids into the white settlements. Do the Cherokees want to be painted with the same clay?"

Apparently Chief Barbed Arrow had been waiting for a chance to express himself, for he said:

"The Cherokees have tried for eighty years to be a friend to the white man, but is it fair to the Cherokees to take everything they love from them piece by piece?"

"I think I understand the feelings of the chief," Fowler declared, anxious to prevent any outbreak that might inflame the already excited braves.

"To understand is not enough," Barbed Arrow declared. "The Cherokees were once a powerful Indian nation in Georgia, many hundred miles to the east. We signed many treaties with the white man, and each time our lands were reduced. We might have held some portion of them, but gold was discovered. Gold means little to the red man, but it makes his white brother crazy. We do not understand that."

"But didn't the government arrange for your tribe to be moved to Oklahoma?"

"You know the story of that, Clay Fowler," Barbed Arrow declared grimly. "Our people were betrayed by some of their own leaders. Your soldiers forced them on a trek across the mountains and over the big river, and on the seven hundred mile journey, four thousand of our people died. That was a great loss we have never forgotten. Your white men started calling the Indian Territory 'The Dump,' and at times it has been just that. But the Cherokees have worked hard with their civilized neighbors of the Creek, Seminole, Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes."

"We appreciate that," Fowler declared.

"Now, however," Barbed Arrow went on, "we've found our lands being compressed again. We were to receive monies from the Government that would permit us to live as white men do, in their cities and on their farms, but this money has not come to us, and now we do not have our land, either."

Fowler knew something of the bungling going on in the Indian Affairs offices in Washington, and was not surprised to learn that the Indians resented it. At the same time it was up to Fowler and men like him, who had the confidence of the Indians, to keep them under control until the red tape could be cut in Washington.

The Missouri man knew something of the arrangements being made at the nation's capital, and he brought a crumpled newspaper item from his pocket. He offered this to Chief Barbed Arrow and said:

"The Great White Father in Washington hasn't forgotten you. You will see from this talking paper that the Congress has appointed a commission to the Five Tribes known as the

Dawes Commission. This commission is given complete authority to enter into negotiations with the Indians in the Territory, for allotment of lands or cession to the United States."

Barbed Arrow looked over the article, then handed it back to Fowler solemnly. Fowler knew that the Cherokee chief was interested, and he said:

"Threatening the people who have moved into the Cherokee strip in good faith is not going to gain your ends for you. It will merely bring the yellow-legs into your towns, and the death of four thousand braves on the March from Georgia will be a small thing compared to the victims of this new plague. Don't you realize that? The people now living in the Outlet are small people like yourselves. They do not have many hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay the Cherokees. It is the Government in Washington that has the money."

Barbed Arrow nodded his understanding. Then one of the squaws approached him with bowls of food for his evening meal. The chief set these aside for a moment and brought up a red soapstone pipe. He tamped tobacco into it and passed it to Clay Fowler, after taking a puff on it himself.

When the ceremony was completed, the chief and his guest took the bowls of food and consumed them. Other sub-chiefs and sagamores came up to speak with Barbed Arrow, and finally, when they were again alone, the old Cherokee said:

"Clay Fowler did not come to see me to talk about the troubles of the Indians. What is your mission?"

"I came to buy cattle," Fowler pointed out, "and also to gain some knowledge of the activities of certain white men named Pug Bates and Buck McGann. Do you know them?"

Barbed Arrow weighed the question stolidly, then said:

"Bad men, very bad men. But I do not know where they are."

Clay knew that it would be impossible for him to pursue the question further, since Barbed Arrow's reply had been so blunt. But at the same time there was something in the attitude of the Cherokee that made him feel the Indian might have given information if he had wanted to.

The deal for the cattle was discussed, and Fowler explained his plan for setting up a place on Red Rock Creek. Barbed Arrow's stern face brightened a bit, and he looked as though mention of Red Rock Creek brought back some pleasant memories.

He gestured in the direction of the peace pipe and said:

"The stone from which my pipe was made came from Red Rock Creek. It is a good omen."

The chief then issued instructions for the gathering of the stock Clay Fowler was planning to drive northward to his place on Red Rock Creek. One of the squaws was assigned to prepare a pallet for him for the night, and Fowler retired.

Early the next morning he was awake, and looking over the camp. He still heard the muttered jargon of the Indians from the various tribes and decided that they were working themselves up into a frenzy that might cause them to raid and burn the farms along the southern end of the Cherokee Outlet.

This information would have to get to Captain Larson and others of the cavalry officers along the area. He could transmit it from Kingfisher over the railroad telegraph.

Fowler had the range-rider's habit of sleeping with most of his clothes on, and when he had pulled on his riding boots and donned his hat he was fully dressed. His gun belts were rolled up under the saddle he used for a pillow, and he checked these before buckling them around his hips.

Then he strode down toward the chief's cabin to join him in breakfast. As he walked along, he immediately discovered a change in the attitude of the Indians. The Tonkawas, Poncas and Kiowas had been glowering at him on the previous evening, but now the Cherokees and Creeks were also turning aside as he passed.

"Something's up," Fowler said to himself. His hands closed over his gun butts and loosened them in their holsters. Then he turned into the chief's hut and raised his hand in greeting. Barbed Arrow was seated at a heavy wooden table, and he looked up as Clay Fowler entered. He did not return the greeting of the Missouri man, and Fowler recognized this as a deliberate insult.

"Why does Chief Barbed Arrow act this way?" Fowler asked grimly.

Barbed Arrow turned to a councillor who was at his shoulder, and there was an exchange in Cherokee. Fowler understood the language, and was puzzled and amazed at the gist of the conversation. Finally Chief Barbed Arrow said:

"The Cherokee do not wish to deal with Clay Fowler. Chief Barbed Arrow does not want to have anything to do with the white man who speaks with the split tongue."

"Split tongue?" Fowler demanded. "But I have never spoken anything but the truth to you."

"We will see," Barbed Arrow declared. "Are you one of the white men with the big six-guns who kills unarmed men?"

Clay Fowler was puzzled. He resented the implication that he might have ever gunned down an innocent or defenseless man.

"I have never drawn my guns, save in self-defense, or to aid people who needed help," Fowler declared emphatically.

Chief Barbed Arrow brought his hand to his cheek, and studied the white scout from beneath lowered brows. Then he asked:

"Did you know a Colonel Forsythe Neale?"

"Yes," Fowler replied. "He was a Kentucky horse grower who came to Kansas hoping to move into the Cherokee Outlet and raise horses."

"He was my friend," Chief Barbed Arrow declared. "I had much correspondence with him, and he was going to use my Indian mares in a test on the breeding of powerful range animals. He is dead!"

The last three words were snapped off with all the crackle of a whip shot. It was obvious that the death of Colonel Forsythe Neale had affected the Cherokee chieftain rather deeply.

"Unfortunately, that is so," Fowler declared. "I was there when he was killed in a tent saloon on Payne's Creek in southern Kansas. But what has that to do with me?"

"You killed him!" Chief Barbed Arrow said soberly. "And you have abused my hospitality by coming here. You will take your horse and leave this district."

Clay Fowler was stunned by the sudden turn of events. The accusation the Cherokee chief had flung at him was the last one he had expected to hear.

"You are mistaken, Barbed Arrow," Fowler said coldly. "Colonel Neale was killed by a man named Wes Gillen. I shot and killed Gillen as punishment for his crime."

"That I know," Barbed Arrow replied, completely disarming Fowler by his words. "But Gillen killed at your orders, and you made yourself a hero by killing your hireling. That is one way to impress a white girl. I do not think even the murdering Comanches would think of anything as brutal as that. Slaying a girl's father, that you might take his place."

Fowler saw what poison had been poured into Barbed Arrow's mind, and he was familiar enough with Indian psychology to know that there was nothing he could do immediately to clear up the situation. It would be better to let Barbed Arrow learn of his error from other sources.

The Missouri man saluted the Cherokee chief, withdrew from the room, and moved through the hostile camp toward his horse. As he walked, he was trying to decide who might have carried this vicious and untrue story to the Cherokee chieftain. His mind canvassed the list of possibilities. First there was Buck McGann. Then there was Pug Bates. Chief Barbed Arrow had denied seeing either one of them recently, and the Indian chief would not lie. Comanche Carter was another possibility. Or Pecos Porter. Porter and his men had moved out to the north after the battle on Red Rock Creek, but there was nothing to have prevented them from circling back to the south.

"In any case," Fowler declared, "there are things stirring here, and I'm sure the cavalry will want to know about them."

He found Ranger in a rope corral with a herd of Indian ponies, and after drawing him out, he saddled and bridled, and then rode off to the west.

Kingfisher was only a small collection of shacks on the Kansas and Texas Railroad. But there was a one-room station and a telegraph operator, and Clay Fowler reached it by noon and sent his message to Captain Fred Larson at Enid.

He waited for the reply. It came during the early afternoon, and Fowler read it carefully:

GVT UAS ENID, I.T.

SEPTEMBER 30 1893

CLAY FOWLER

KINGFISHER

SITUATION SOUNDS SERIOUS STOP ADVISING ALL POSTS AND PATROLS IMMEDIATELY STOP WARN FARMERS ON WAY NORTH TO RED ROCK CREEK STOP GOOD LUCK

LARSON

CHAPTER 16

Clay Fowler rode leisurely northward, and zigzagged back and forth across the country from the railroad track to the Arkansas and the Canadian Rivers, notifying the ranchers and farmers of the fact that the Indians were gathering along the north bank of the Cimarron, and were looking for trouble. Finally one of Larson's patrols caught up with him, and the cavalry took over the duty of warning the settlers.

Then Fowler made a beeline for his own section on Red Rock Creek, wondering at the same time how the Neales were making out. Both areas were far enough north of the Indian Territory border so that there was only a slight chance that there would be any immediate danger. Besides, if Barbed Arrow was interested in the Neales and their thoroughbred horses, it was unlikely that there would be any danger for them at all.

When night fell on the third day after his departure from the Cherokee camp, Fowler was still some fifteen miles from Red Rock Creek, but he decided to ride on in.

He stopped for a pack snack, and saw that

Ranger had a fill of oats and plenty to drink. Then he tightened up his cinches, gathered his reins and swept aboard. He held the animal to a fast walk for the first ten miles, and took a little more than an hour and a half to cover the distance. Then there was a brightening of the sky ahead that suddenly put him on the alert. Mindful of the prairie fires that had been set on the first day of the land rush, Fowler gigged his horse and galloped forward.

"That looks like a big one," he declared. "Must be spreading across three or four sections."

He moistened his hand and held it up to the air. The wind was blowing from the east now. That would mean that there was a chance of burning out all the grazing land from the Arkansas River to the railroad track and maybe beyond.

Ranger sensed something of the urgency of the moment, and he paced himself accordingly. As Fowler passed a number of the small farms en route, the drumming of the hoofs of his horse brought the people out of doors, and they turned to watch the ruddy sky to the north.

Some of the men hitched up teams or mounted animals bareback and came along in his wake. But Fowler outdistanced them with little difficulty. When he was within only two miles of his place, a sharp anguish seized him. He tightened the reins and muttered:

"It's not the prairie at all. It's my place."

After this momentary pause in the surprise of discovery, he slackened the lines, and Ranger beat out a grim tatoo on the hard-packed ground of the prairie.

As he approached closer to the Red Rock Creek farm, Clay Fowler heard the sounds of gunfire, and when he came up over the last rise before the drop to the creek bank itself, he swung off his horse, snapped the Winchester out of its scabbard, and peered ahead.

The ranch house was burning; already all of the siding was gone and the roof was caved in. Pillars of blackened wood stood up at the four corners, and the blackened ruin of the chimney loomed up at the rear.

Around the house in a wide ring there galloped perhaps a score of Indian ponies, each one of them ridden by a feathered brave. They were shouting and screaming, and firing their guns into the ranch house as though someone were still in there.

A cold sweat gripped Fowler, and his lips moved slowly.

"Laddy Graham! Good old Laddy!"

The terror that seized him for a moment was replaced by the cool calculation that had served him in such good stead in Indian encounters in the past.

Now Fowler knelt carefully on the ridge, and judged the range from his site to the galloping ring around the ranch house. It was easy shooting for the Winchester as far as distance was concerned. But the moving figures and the flickering flames behind them would make shooting difficult.

The Missouri man settled down carefully, placed the butt of his gun against his cheek, and picked up one of the redskins as he came around from the east. Leading the man the least bit, he squeezed off his first shot. The crackling and roar of the flames muted the explosion, but an instant later, one of the riders plunged from his horse, rolled over several times, and then lay still.

"Good!" Fowler gritted. Then he leveled his rifle again, swung it carefully, and squeezed off another shot. This time the rider threw up his hands, the horse swung around to the side, and finally the Indian sprawled in the mud.

Others of the riders realized that a new factor had come into the conflict, and they tried to discover the direction from which the shooting was coming. All of them finally turned their attention away from the burning ranch house, and gathered in a group between the blazing building and the creek.

"Like sitting ducks," laughed Fowler hysterically. "Laddy," he shouted, "you're going to be paid off plenty."

He worked the lever of his Winchester as fast as he could pull it, and saw the Indians spread apart like a startled covey of quail. They gathered up their dead and wounded and then flung themselves aboard their cayuses and galloped away.

As the excitement around the ranch house died down, Fowler heard hoofbeats coming up behind him. He quickly jammed other bullets into his rifle, and turned to meet the new menace, only to discover that the newcomers were the farmers who had been aroused by his passing and the spectacle of the burning buildings limned against the sky.

"It's all over, I guess," Fowler told the first of the overalled sodbusters. "But I'm afraid it's all up with my pard. We'll go see."

Gripping the reins of his Ranger horse, Clay Fowler strode forward down the hill, and waded through the waters of Red Rock Creek. He left his horse in the willows, and most of the farmers followed his example. Then they grouped around him and headed toward the house.

Fowler's darting eyes searched everywhere for some sign of the blackened body of the old cavalry corporal. He saw it nowhere. Then he became certain that Graham had been in the house at the time it was set afire. A survey of the area indicated that the barn and a few small sheds had escaped the holocaust.

Clay Fowler went into the barn to get some tool with which to throw aside the burning timbers of the house to locate Graham's body. As he was opening the door a grim voice shouted:

"Take one step in here, and I'll blast you down, you thievin' redskins."

"Laddy!" shouted Clay Fowler, his voice hearty with the surprise and pleasure that gripped him. "What are you doing here—and alive, too!"

"Clay Fowler! Why, you old maverick. I should have known that you wouldn't leave me with all the excitement to myself. How've you been?"

Graham jumped down from the hay loft, and started patting his young partner on the shoulder. They were almost hysterical in their delight at seeing each other again. Then the pair walked out of the barn and toward the sodbusters. Fowler told his friends of his good luck.

They all celebrated with him in the way of settlers everywhere, and then Fowler invited them to stay until morning. The invitation was turned down, however, since the men wanted to get back to their own acres.

When they had gone back across the creek, and the flames were dying down, Fowler and Graham approached the burned ranch house. When they got into the light of the burning building, Fowler looked at his companion, and saw that there was a smear of blood across his shirt.

"You're hurt!" he said. "How bad did they get you?"

"It's all right now," Graham said, but it was obvious that the dryness of his lips was not caused by heat of the fire. "They got me high up in the shoulder. But I figure I salivated one of them, too."

Fowler insisted that the tough, grizzled corporal lie down and permit Clay to attend to his injury. Graham finally submitted, and Fowler looked at the angry wound. The bullet was still lodged in the flesh under Graham's arm, and Fowler said:

"We've got to get that out, or you'll really feel it in the morning."

He took a hunting knife from his belt, heated the blade, then with a quick thrust he jabbed the lump that was muscle and tissue holding the leaden pellet. The battered projectile dropped out in his hand. Fowler was readying a bit of wadding, and he clamped this over the wound.

Laddy Graham looked up at him and smiled a pained smile. Fowler told him:

"Take it easy, boy. You haven't shot your last Indian yet. Mark my words."

Fowler gathered up a tin pail and hurried down to the creek. He filled it with water, and brought it back to set it on top of a fire made of embers gathered from the burned ranchhouse. When this water was heated sufficiently, Fowler removed the temporary dressings and bathed Graham's injuries. Then he found cotton and bandages in a kit in the barn, and finally completed his work on the bullet holes.

"You'd better get back up into the hay loft," Fowler remarked, "and take it easy. That's the only way you'll get back your strength."

Graham finally agreed, and the scout helped him up into the hay.

Back in the open again, Fowler realized that he was extremely weary. He went down into the willows to get his pack from Ranger and to unsaddle the animal. As he was striding in that direction, he heard a horse approaching. One of his guns snapped into his hand, and he was on the alert.

The rider was coming in from the west, and Fowler realized that the horse had run a long way. He turned to meet the newcomer, and as he approached, he saw that it was Kitty Trotter.

He concealed something of his surprise and said:

"Light down, Kitty. What brings you out here at this hour of the night?"

There was a worried expression on the girl's face, and she hesitated for some moments before speaking. Fowler helped her out of the saddle, and her arms went around his shoulders. He found himself returning her caress, and enjoying it when she declared:

"I was so frightened. I saw the sky red with fire, and I knew it was from your direction. I've heard about the Indians, and how they're going out to pillage. I thought you were dead."

"I was fortunate. I wasn't even here when the raiders came. But I did manage to come up in time to speed their departure. I figure I tallied for a few of them. But you know how Indians are. They carry off all their dead and wounded."

"Then it was Indians?" Kitty Trotter remarked.

"Sure thing," Fowler replied. Even as he did so, he wondered whether the girl was speaking from prior knowledge of similar raids elsewhere in the Strip. Kitty relaxed a bit, and Fowler led her toward one of the sheds where a work bench would provide a seat for them.

"Aren't you in Enid?" Fowler asked the girl.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "I'm setting up in business there, just like I told you. Sort of competition for Heyward's place. Of course, he doesn't have the type of attraction I can offer."

Fowler thought he understood. He was sure of it a moment later when Kitty caught his face between her hands, and kissed him full on the lips.

"You get the idea, don't you?"

Fowler did, and said so. Kitty Trotter laughed. Then Fowler heard a crisp voice saying:

"Quite a touching scene. I hope we're not interrupting anything."

Fowler and Kitty jumped to their feet, and Fowler dropped his hands to his side. He saw that the newcomers were Mrs. Neale and Marion in a buckboard, and Silver Dollar Welch riding alongside of them on a horse. Welch's shoulder was no longer bandaged, but he appeared to find it a bit stiff when he tried to use it.

Fowler had nothing to say at the moment, and Kitty decided that it was time for her to step into the breach.

"You mustn't misunderstand," Kitty told Marion. "Clay has had a little trouble here.

He was quite upset when I arrived, and I thought it was my duty to comfort him."

"I think I understand completely," the Kentucky girl declared. Mrs. Neale was watching the couple on the ground before her as though anxious not to reach a verdict that would condemn Fowler without a hearing.

Clay tried to shift the discussion. "Laddy Graham is up in the barn, pretty seriously wounded. Maybe you'd like to look in on him, Mrs. Neale."

The kindly frontier woman accepted this assignment, climbed down over the front wheel of the buckboard, and strode away. Kitty Trotter hurried off with her. This left Clay Fowler alone with Silver Dollar Welch and Marion Neale. Fowler turned to the girl and asked:

"How are things going at your place?"

"Oh, we're moving right along," Marion replied calmly. "The folks in the neighborhood are very coöperative, now that we've gotten most of the land claim tangles straightened out. The first few days, I expected the whole thing to explode in a bloody war. But now we're settled down and the houses are going up in great style."

Fowler accepted her invitation to visit them with a smile, but noticed that Marion supplied it in a dull, calm manner without too much enthusiasm. Clay turned to Lester Welch and said:

"Glad to see you back in the saddle, sir. I'm sure it's going to be only a short time before you'll be doing everything you want to do. Good luck to you."

"I hope you're right," Welch replied. "There are a good many things I want to do, and I certainly want to go ahead on them without delay."

"Lester has already been getting some things done," the girl declared. "He went down to see the Indians Father was planning to do business with, and they've come to some sort of an agreement. The breeding project that was Father's real reason for coming to Oklahoma is probably going to go through on schedule."

"That's right," Silver Dollar Welch declared. "Chief Barbed Arrow was very considerate, and I'm sure we're going to get along rather well."

Clay Fowler, recalling his own talk with the chief, wondered whether the hopes and plans of the Neales were going to be blasted by Indian hostility even before they had a chance to burgeon.

"I used to think Chief Barbed Arrow was a good friend of mine, too," Fowler said sadly. Then he waved an arm about over the burned area and went on: "If this is a sample of his friendship, I guess I've had enough of it."

Marion was obviously uncomfortable, and after a further exchange of pleasantries, she said:

"I'd better go join Mother. We'll have to be getting back."

The girl hurried up the slope toward the barn, and Clay Fowler turned to Silver Dollar Welch again.

"A fine girl," he commented.

"She is that," Welch agreed, "and now that we're here alone, I'd like to speak to you. I'm a broad-minded man, and I'm not inclined to make an issue of things like this episode with Kitty Trotter, but at the same time, I think it's only fair to tell you that Marion and I are thinking of getting married. Her mother approves, and I'm sure it will make everything much more comfortable around our place. We don't want people to be talking about my living with them. You can see that."

A lump of lead formed in Clay Fowler's throat. The possibility of Silver Dollar Welch being romantically interested in Marion Neale hadn't occurred to him at all. But now that he studied the man, he couldn't see any reason Marion might not look upon him with interest. At the moment, Fowler realized that he was under a handicap, and there was nothing much he could do toward showing the girl his own feelings.

"That sounds like a pleasant arrangement," he declared. "I'm sure that if Marion wants it that way, you'll all be very happy."

After attending to the horses on the buckboard, and to Welch's mount, Fowler finally found himself free to join the others in the barn. Laddy Graham was sitting up in the hay, obviously unable to understand the reason for all the attention that had suddenly been showered upon him.

The first fingers of sunlight were pushing up over the Arkansas River to the east.

Clay Fowler, thinking of the incidents that had occurred during the night wondered whether this sunrise meant a completely new life for him. It would take time for him to rebuild the ranch house; he would also have to rebuild his status with Marion, and with the Cherokees, if he hoped to carry out the two missions that were closest to his heart.

CHAPTER 17

The entire group had an open air breakfast, and shortly before nine o'clock, the Neales and Silver Dollar Welch drove away. Clay Fowler had been hoping that Kitty Trotter would accompany them at least as far as the railroad, but apparently the St. Louis girl had no intention of leaving at once. She insisted that Laddy Graham needed attention, and there was no denying this.

In the middle of the morning, Graham was sleeping and Fowler was catching up on his lost rest, too. Kitty Trotter, dressed in a serviceable pair of overalls, was moving around the ranch doing the chores, and attending to chickens, pigs and other stock that had been overlooked in the raid on the Fowler place.

Shortly after noon Clay awoke and looked out of the loading window in the hay barn. He saw Kitty going about the work on the place as though she had been doing it all her life, and certainly looking as though she was right at home. He tried to reconcile this domestic scene with the stories he had heard about Kitty's escapades in St. Louis and in the frontier towns from Hays to Enid. Even in the two or three weeks that had passed since the opening of the Cherokee Outlet, the Trotter place in Enid had gained a reputation all its own.

"Maybe she just hasn't had the proper surroundings," Fowler told himself, "or someone to give her a helping hand."

Suddenly he recognized something familiar about the oversized levis the girl was wearing and, peering up at the hook above him, saw that they were his own. He laughed aloud at this. Kitty heard the sound and came running toward the barn.

"Oh, hello," she said. Some of her sultriness and exoticism had been rubbed off by sweat; and her sleek black hair was now hanging in tendrils down over one cheek.

"Dinner ready?" Fowler asked.

"We'll throw it together in a jiffy," Kitty promised him. "How's the patient?"

"I haven't had a chance to look at him," Fowler admitted, "but judging from the snores coming from that end of the hay loft, I'd say that he was doing all right. Graham is a tough old soldier. It would take more than one bullet to finish him."

Fowler managed to rig up a temporary table while Kitty Trotter was getting a meal together, and when they sat down, the girl talked about a number of things. Finally, however, she got around to the question that had apparently been troubling her.

"Marion Neale is quite a girl, isn't she?"

"I guess so," Fowler replied, a bit taken aback, and not knowing quite what to say. "She's different from any other girl I've ever seen out here. A real sport, I'd say."

Kitty Trotter played with her food for several moments, then looked up at Clay Fowler with a keen glance and asked:

"Thinking of making a play for her?"

"You mean marrying her?"

The Trotter girl nodded, weighing every movement of the Missouri man as they discussed the situation. Finally Fowler replied:

"Maybe I had ideas along that line, but I guess they were all washed up this morning."

"You mean she's jealous about catching you and me down there by the shed?"

"That may have been part of it," Fowler admitted, "but I understand Silver Dollar Welch is going to marry her. That she's willing, and it's all right with her mother. So what can I do about that?"

Kitty Trotter picked up a slab of sourdough bread, chewed on it for a while, then remarked:

"So she's going to marry Silver Dollar Welch? That's real news."

"It's probably the best idea," Fowler said calmly. "Things are pretty wild out here now, but they're bound to settle down in a couple of months, at least before spring. Then there's liable to be talk, if Welch is living out there with those women. You know how it is."

"I guess I do," the girl agreed. "Fowler, I think you're a brick. I wish you could become interested in me." There was such sincerity in the girl's words that Fowler was taken off balance by them.

Kitty got up, carried the few dishes to the wreck pan, and Fowler watched her go with new interest. Perhaps if Marion Neale wasn't to be his, he could make out with a girl like Kitty Trotter. He would probably have to fight down criticism and ridicule, but he wasn't afraid of any barbed tongues, any more than he was afraid of hot lead.

The afternoon moved along slowly. Fowler did a lot of clean-up work around the place, and began preparing the foundations for the building of a new ranch house. At about three o'clock, Kitty Trotter came from behind the barn. This time she was dressed in her own clothes, and was leading the horse she had ridden out from Enid.

"I guess I'll be getting back to town," she said.

"Thanks for coming," Fowler told her. He reached up to grip her hand. Kitty Trotter held back for a moment, then remarked:

"So you're the man who thinks gun law is going to rod the Cherokee Strip."

Clay Fowler was puzzled. A curious smile broke across Kitty Trotter's face, and as he looked up at her, she opened the fingers of one hand, and exposed a bright bit of metal in the palm of her hand.

Across the badge there was the legend: "UNITED STATES MARSHAL."

"I found it in your trousers when I was wearing them this morning," the girl explained. "You don't think I'm a snooper, do you?"

Fowler shook his head slowly, accepted the badge, and dropped it into his pocket.

"Not at all," he declared. "But I'm going to ask you to keep this confidential. I'm sure I can trust you."

Kitty Trotter didn't speak for several moments. Her throat was lumpy, and there was moisture in the corner of her eye. Then she said:

"You can trust me—now! I'm beginning to understand a few things that were a bit obscure before. Maybe other people are beginning to wonder, too. If you've got a job to do, you'd better be quick about it, before this whole country blows up in your face."

The Missouri man was amazed at the fury in the girl's words. He wanted to ask her for more details, but she turned her horse with a capable drag on the reins, gigged the animal toward the creek, and splashed across the water and took up the journey toward Enid.

Clay watched her out of sight, then turned and scratched his head. Some of his thoughts were muddled, and he wanted to talk to Laddy Graham about them.

He found the old corporal sitting up and leaning against the wall of the barn. Graham studied his face with a curious expression and asked:

"You and Kitty Trotter come to blows yet?"

"Not exactly," Fowler declared, "but she's discovered that I'm a United States Marshal."

It was Graham's turn to show his surprise now.

"*You* a United States Marshal!"

"Sure thing," Fowler chuckled.

"No wonder you got on such intimate terms with Grover Cleveland. I suppose you met up with him when he told you to raise your right hand and swear to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

"That was it," Fowler laughed. "But now that the news is out, I'm going to have to stir out of here, and make sure that things go my way for a change. But I hate like the devil to leave you alone."

"Don't go worrying about me," Graham told him. "I'm mad at myself because I can't tote a gun with you. Who're you going to hit at first?"

"I reckon I'll talk to Larson first, tell him what has happened, and then head back for Barbed Arrow's camp. If his Injuns are running wild, I'll have to copper their bets right away."

"Injuns running wild?" Graham sniffed. "You plumb loco, Fowler? Them hombres what busted in here last night and put the torch to the place weren't no more redskins than you or me!"

Clay Fowler pricked up his ears at this announcement and asked:

"How do you figure that?"

"It ain't a case of figuring," Graham assured him; "it's the downright truth. Lucky I was in the barn when the doings busted wide open, because I got a good chance to see what was going on. Some of them waddies weren't wearing no Injun rigging at all when they first arrived. They put on the feathers and breech clouts out behind the barn. And did you ever see a redskin what liked to ride a horse with saddle and stirrups and all the trimmings, excepting them educated Cherokee Scouts?"

"You're right," Fowler admitted. "I should have noticed that myself, even though I was plumb riled up when I came up over that hill and saw the place burning from kitchen to garret."

"Take a slant at them hoofprints in the yard, too," Graham suggested, "and you'll see that they're all shod horses. That ain't Injun stuff either."

"You're okay as far as you go," Fowler told him, "but who was the renegade behind this business?"

"I ain't set my mnid to that yet," Laddy Graham replied. "But was I given two guesses, I'd point the finger at Pecos Porter and Buck McGann. Neither one of them has no ground for liking you; and Porter especially had a hankering for this particular part of Oklahoma."

"Maybe you're right," Fowler agreed. "But there's still a hombre higher up, and I'm going to ferret him out. I got a hunch that Enid would be a good starting place. I'll make you comfortable and head out in that direction. Keno?"

"Keno, pard, and good luck to you."

Clay Fowler spent the rest of the afternoon making things comfortable for Laddy Graham; then he saddled up Ranger, and headed for

Enid. The journey to the town took him about three hours, but it was still early in the evening when he rode in.

This was his first visit to the Big Town of the Cherokee Strip, and he realized that it had expanded considerably since Laddy Graham and Lieutenant Norton had described it after their trip to Red Rock Creek.

Many of the tents that had been visible during the first weeks of the city's existence were replaced by more serviceable buildings that would be a protection against the winter weather that would be closing in within a month or so.

Clay Fowler left Ranger at a livery stable, still with unpainted boards and peeled pole corrals, and strolled down the muddy street. He studied the various emporiums and smiled. They reminded him of dozens of other frontier towns he had visited in the past seven years.

Finally he saw a one-story building with a huge tent looming up behind it. A sign across the front of the building identified the place as: "KITTY TROTTER'S." A second sign in smaller letters announced that the place was noted for: "CAREFREE COMFORT."

After looking over the building, Fowler decided that the wooden structure in front was an office. It had several windows which were made of real glass brought in over the railroad. There was a lighted lamp on the desk behind one of the windows, and Clay looked into the room.

He saw the back of a man, hat on head, and bobbing up and down as though engaging Kitty in animated conversation. Fowler didn't want to appear as though he were eavesdropping, but he was curious about Kitty's company. He did not want to barge in where he wasn't wanted.

There was an alley between the Kitty Trotter place and a new structure rising alongside of it. This bore the legend: "COMANCHE CARTER'S: DRINKING, DINING AND GAMING."

From the side window, Fowler was able to see into the office, and at the first glimpse he recognized Kitty Trotter's visitor. It was Silver Dollar Welch.

The window on the alley was hinged and partly open, and Fowler caught snatches of the conversation that came from the room.

"You're getting pretty uppity," Kitty was saying. "I called you in here to find out how I fit into this combination."

The words amazed Fowler as much as the manner in which they were spoken. Welch's face wore a frown, and he reached across the desk as though trying to grip Kitty's hand. Then he replied:

"This is just business, Kitty. Nothing else but business. You like to have nice things, don't you?"

"I sure do," Kitty replied emphatically, "and I've about decided that you're not the man to give them to me. I spent a day out on the Graham-Fowler place today, and I really lived. It's not the dirty, sordid type of living that you have to offer a girl. I've been crazy. My sense of values has been as distorted and dirty as the Missouri River."

There was silence in the room for several moments; then Silver Dollar Welch spoke up.

"You're not going soft on that Missouri muttonhead, are you?" he asked. "If I thought you were doing that, I'd—well, you know I'm nuts about you, baby."

Clay Fowler couldn't believe his ears. Only this morning, Lester Welch had been telling him of his interest in Marion Neale; now it was evident that there was some sort of a liaison between him and Kitty Trotter.

As he was about to move off, Fowler heard footsteps on the board sidewalk before the Trotter place. Not wishing to be caught in the position of an eavesdropper, he stepped out casually, and bumped directly into Marion Neale.

He almost threw her off balance, and she clutched at his arm to save herself.

Fowler grabbed at her, and then said:

"Marion! This is a pleasant surprise."

The girl looked at him, and in the flickering light from the lamps, he could see that her face wore a confused expression. Finally he asked:

"Have you time to take a walk with me?"

"Do you think I'll be interested in anything you have to tell me?" the girl asked spiritedly.

"Perhaps," Fowler told her. Marion shrugged, and strolled off in the direction of Captain Larson's office. When they were close to the office, and beyond the groups of hangers on in front of Comanche Carter's place, Fowler said:

"I'm going to tell you a secret that is shared with only two other people."

"That's nice," the girl said. "And who are the two other people?"

"I don't think that's important, is it?"

"Perhaps not," Marion admitted. "What is it you have to tell me?"

Clay Fowler produced the badge from his pocket and showed it to the girl. She studied the inscription, and some of the whiteness left her face.

"I'm a United States Marshal," Fowler told her. "I've been checking on the land-jumpers and raiders who are trying to steal all the good land in the Indian Territory. The Government is sending out the Dawes Commission to act on my reports. I think I'm pretty close to the men behind the claim-jumping in the Cherokee Strip. I need a little help to close my case."

Marion was interested. She looked at Fowler and asked:

"How can I help you?"

"You're seeking the man responsible for the murder of your father. I have a hunch that it is the same man who is behind both these killings."

"Buck McGann?" the girl asked.

"Do you really think it's Buck McGann who is responsible?"

"I'm pretty sure it is," Marion declared, "and Mr. Welch seems to think so, too."

"How long have you known Mr. Welch?" Fowler asked.

"Well," Marion replied, "Mother and I haven't known him very long, but he's an old, old friend of Father's. Used to sail up and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers with him."

Clay Fowler nodded, as they strolled on toward the Army headquarters where Fowler had some business to attend to with Captain Larson. He was almost at the doorway when the captain came rushing out. He slid to a halt as he saw Fowler, and said:

"So here you are! Well, thank God for that!"

"What do you mean by that?" Fowler asked quickly.

"I've just had a report that Buck McGann and his men have left Enid, armed to the teeth and heading for Red Rock Creek to knock you and your outfit into a cocked hat."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Fowler demanded. "Laddy Graham is out there alone. He went through a tough session last night, and just squeezed through with his life. He's in no condition to fight off those gun-hungry hombres. Let's get going."

Larson settled down on a bench. He was a worn out man, and looked it. "That's not going to be as easy as it sounds," he declared. "Lieutenant Norton and the men are over west. I only have a small garrison here. Maybe you can round up a posse."

United States Marshal Clay Fowler looked at the cavalry captain, then asked soberly:

"Just where would I look for a posse?"

"You might try Comanche Carter's place; or the Heyward House," Larson replied. "There ought to be a bunch of youngsters in there who wouldn't be averse to burning powder in a good cause."

"Comanche Carter's?" Fowler repeated.

"We'll try it, but I sure hope I'm not making a big mistake."

Captain Fred Larson buckled on his pistol belt and an orderly brought up his horse. Fowler's Ranger gelding was down near the Carter place. Marion Neale hurried along the sidewalk with him, and said:

"I'll go find Silver Dollar Welch. He'll want to help, I'm sure."

"That's a good idea," Fowler agreed. Then he was pinning his United States Marshal's badge on the heavy cloth of his shirt and turning into the big tent structure of the Comanche Carter place. There was a grim expression on his face, and he looked about him as he strolled down between the bar and the gaming tables. Then he leaned against the bar and shouted:

"I'm here in the interest of justice for the settlers in the Cherokee Outlet. In the name of the United States, I'm asking every able bodied man in the room to volunteer to ride in a posse to arrest a band of killers now ravaging the countryside. Step up, boys, and Uncle Sam will treat you to grub and bullets!"

The reaction in the room was mixed. Several of the men looked at Clay Fowler, recognized him, and turned away. Others muttered: "Fowler, a United States Marshal. Gun law, and he's it!"

Comanche Carter came bouncing out of his office. He wore his usual flashy clothes, and was swinging his gold watch charm in one hand. With the other he was holding a sizable-looking gun belt from which dangled a heavy Colt's revolver.

"Swear me in, Marshal. I've always been for law and order. And if anyone here doesn't want to ride with the law, they can't drink at my bar any more."

Comanche Carter's reaction was a surprise to Fowler, but he was glad of this break in the apathy of the group before him. Other men stood up at their tables, took out their six-guns and checked the charges. Some of them lined up alongside Clay Fowler and looked to him for instructions. Others were sidling in the direction of Comanche Carter, as though recognizing him as their natural leader.

Clay Fowler realized what was going to happen at once, and he immediately took steps to correct it.

"Any man who goes, goes as my deputy. We're not going to have cliques here. Are you taking orders from me, Carter?"

"Sure thing, Marshal," Carter declared. "And all my men will be doing the same thing."

A shaking of heads gave formal agreement. Fowler turned to Captain Larson. There was a curious smile on the soldier's face as Fowler asked:

"What do you think, Captain?"

"You've got your posse, Marshal," Larson replied. "And I don't mind telling you, I'd hate to meet up with them on the prairie on a dark night."

"All right, men," Fowler said sternly. "Get your horses, and we'll be getting under way!"

There was a scramble under the flaps of the tent and out through the front and back doors. Fowler walked to his Ranger horse and mounted up. He looked around him, then rode slowly off down the street.

CHAPTER 18

The posse that galloped out of Enid that night, to ride to the aid of the beleaguered Laddy Graham on the twin claims on Red Rock Creek, was one of the first formal law enforcement parties in the Cherokee Outlet. The group was made up of about sixty men, and with Comanche Carter riding up in front with Marshal Clay Fowler there was no immediate question of divided authority.

As they rode, Carter carried on a crisp conversation. He said:

"You know, Fowler, I was wondering whether the Federal Government was going to throw this country open to one hundred thousand people without any sign of Federal law. The yellowlegs don't count; they do their job, but they're for chasing redskins. A white man don't like to do business with the militia."

"You're right," agreed Fowler, amused at the attitude of the man. He wondered what Carter would have thought, if he had known that Fowler had considered him one of the prime suspects responsible for the activities of Buck McGann and his gang; and what he would think if the saloon proprietor knew that

Fowler had acceded to the suggestion for recruiting the posse in the Carter place because it would give him a chance to keep his eye on the wanted men.

"You're a clever boy, Fowler," Carter declared. "I never pegged you for a marshal, and usually I'm a pretty keen reader of men. But I'm glad it's you who is rodding the job. I think I can get along with you."

Clay Fowler didn't just know how to interpret this frank statement. There were any number of big business men who moved into new country such as the Cherokee Outlet with the confirmed belief that their money would be enough to buy them the law, whether it was county, territorial or Federal. Comanche Carter might well be in this category.

After the first five or six miles, the members of the posse lapsed into silence, and gave their attention to their mounts and their weapons. Fowler was trying to decide just how much of an advance start McGann had secured. It couldn't be more than twenty minutes, but twenty minutes was a long time in a gun-fight.

They were still several miles from Red Rock Creek when the first sounds of firing came to them on the night air. Fowler compared his present arrival with the previous encounter in which the pseudo-Indians had been his adversaries. Now, instead of being followed by willing sod-busters who were hardly schooled in the business of frontier night fighting, he was backed by some of the most accomplished gunslingers on the border.

A plan of campaign presented itself to him, and he reined in with an upraised signal to bring the others to a halt. The riders all rocketed in about him, and tightened on their reins. Comanche Carter and Captain Fred Larson were in the forefront, and Fowler said:

"Last night a bunch of men, dressed as Indians, hit the Red Rock Creek place, and burned the ranch house. They were able to get away, because I came in from the south, and couldn't block them off. Tonight we're going to put picked men in all the good spots around that area, and I don't want anyone to get through. Savvy?"

"Keno," replied Fred Larson. "We'll do what we can with the men we have. In the meantime, I sent a trooper after Lieutenant Norton. He ought to be heading this way by morning."

Excitement ran through the entire group. Fowler signaled for silence, and when the men looked at him expectantly, said:

"I have just one other thing to say. The Federal Government hasn't been as blind as some of you folks seem to think. We know that there are at least three groups of blackguards working in this country, trying to take the lives and property of the hard-working people for their own ends. One group of these killers is up ahead, attacking an old cavalry campaigner, and I've got a hunch that he's more than a match for them in a fair fight. Another bunch of these land-crooks played Indian last night, but I know them, and I'm going to track them down."

Murmurs of interest ran through the group, as there was a pause in Fowler's remarks as though he were about to explode a verbal bombshell. With the next words he did just that.

"Men in the third group are right here with us in this posse. We know just who they are, and each one of them will be under the eye and the gun of a man we can thoroughly trust. As long as he concentrates on killing or capturing the McGann men, he will be safe; but at one overt move, this man will be killed. Be warned! We're fighting for a place to live in, a place where decent men can earn their living and raise their families. Gentlemen, we are fighting for a new state in a great country."

Before the men could turn to discuss the situation among themselves, Fowler's tone turned crisp, and he said:

"Ready guns, men. We're going in. Men who are numbered one will go around to the north; those who are numbered two will move off to the east; the threes will come up from the south, and the fours will close the square on the west. Count off!"

The numbers were called off by the men, and then the groups broke up. Each of the men talked to his companions as though they were on a turkey shoot, and the one who downed the greatest number of gobblers would win a prize.

Clay Fowler led the group that came in from the west.. He gave the other groups a chance to get into position, since they would have to do a bit more riding. Finally he decided that all of the men were in position, and would wait for his signal before picking their quarry among the renegades and opening fire.

The United States Marshal found shelter for himself and his fifteen men in a copse of bushes on the rim of a small bluff that sloped gently down to Red Rock Creek. The fusillade of rifle and pistol fire was still pouring into the hay barn where Laddy Graham was living.

Apparently believing that their position was impregnable, Buck McGann and his men were picking their shots. Fowler signaled for silence to his men, and listened to the exchange of shouts between McGann and the others who were with him. Apparently they had discovered that there was only one man at the barn, but they believed it was Clay Fowler.

Fowler stepped up in front of his riflemen, and called out:

"Hold your fire, Buck McGann!"

There was a momentary silence in the ranks of the raiders; then McGann replied:

"Who's handing out orders here? Speak up and identify yourself!"

Fowler cupped his hands to his lips and shouted:

"If you're looking for Clay Fowler, you're looking in the wrong direction. I'm up here, and ready to give you your come-uppance. Are you willing to come out and make it single combat?"

"Clay Fowler?" McGann was obviously puzzled. One or two isolated shots poured into the hay barn from men on the far side of the clearing.

"Hold your lead," shouted McGann. "Something's up here. Speak up, Fowler; what's going on here?"

"Come out into the middle of the clearing, at the corner of the burned ranch house," Fowler ordered. "I'll meet you there. We'll call it a truce for the time being."

"Why do we need a truce?" McGann demanded.

"Because you've walked into a trap!" Fowler said emphatically. "You think you're out here on an easy job of cleaning up a couple of boomers, and destroying their markers, but the man behind you figures that you've outlived your usefulness. You'll never get away from here alive, unless you come to terms—my terms!"

"Big words, Fowler!" McGann declared, with a sneer in his voice. "What kind of terms can you offer?"

Suddenly there was a hoarse bellow in the night, as though it were coming from a megaphone of rolled up birch bark.

"Fowler is a United States Marshal, McGann. You've been tricked. But stand your ground!"

"A United States Marshal?" Buck McGann moved forward from his cover, and approached the corner of the burned ranch house that Clay Fowler had indicated as the rendezvous.

Fowler issued his orders to Fred Larson; then, rising to his full height, he strolled down the hill. His big six-guns whipped against his hips, and with every step he took, his palms brushed against the butts.

Fowler advanced like an avenging Nemesis, and McGann stood as though about to turn and run at any moment.

"Hello, McGann!" Fowler said. "You had a lot to say back in Payne's Creek when you thought you were putting the deadwood on an innocent tenderfoot. What have you to say now?"

"What do you want to know?" McGann asked, still defiant.

"I want the name of the king killer who is behind you. The man who paid the sooners who moved into the Outlet ahead of time. The man who expects to take over these choice lands, when his brand of gun law and yours goes to work on the honest settlers."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed McGann. "You couldn't squeeze that information out of me in hell. I know I'm covered. You've put your neck in a noose this time."

"Is that so?" Fowler asked coldly.

"It is!" McGann retorted. "Gun him down, boys!"

As he spoke, Buck McGann leaped to the shelter of the charred wood at the corner of the stone foundation of the ranch house. A blast of rifle fire splattered lead all around Clay Fowler, and the United States Marshal stood there in spite of it.

He knew that firing in the moonlight was difficult, and that McGann's men would not be too accurate, for they might kill their own leader. When the volley subsided, Fowler curled his lip and said:

"Quite a bit of fireworks, McGann. Now I'll demonstrate."

As the McGann crew had opened fire, the gun flashes had identified their hiding places to the members of the marshal's posse. Fowler shouted:

"Scotch the snakes, boys. The king rattler is still going to rattle."

From all four sides of the basin, as though the united musketry of a trained corps, the possemen opened fire on the hiding places of the McGann men. There were shouts of dismay, and cries of pain.

Clay Fowler darted forward and gripped Buck McGann by the shoulder.

"You've played your ace, but I've jokered you!" Fowler told him. "You're not getting out of this spot."

"What have you got out there?" demanded Buck McGann. "The cavalry?"

"No, sirree," Fowler told him. "It's a marshal's posse. We can hold you pinned down until morning, then wipe you out to a man. Are you going to surrender and give us the name of the man who is behind your nefarious work?"

Buck McGann turned yellow at the display of force that Clay Fowler had brought in with him.

"I can't tell!" McGann insisted. "He'd kill me!"

"The Federal Government is going to hang you anyway," Fowler promised. "If you go out without talking, then the man who is really benefiting from your work will go on living his life, and profiting from your work. We know it's one of three men. If you give us the evidence to convict him, perhaps it will go easier with you."

Cold sweat was bursting out on McGann's forehead. Any hope he may have had that his gunmen would be able to get him out of this spot was now dissipated. Fowler shook the man, then asked:

"Is it Comanche Carter?"

A whistle of surprise went up from the members of the posse. Then a sepulchral voice from somewhere on the rim of the basin, the same voice that had identified Clay Fowler as a marshal, cried out:

"Don't talk, McGann. The marshal knows nothing."

Buck McGann would have liked to believe that, but he couldn't be sure.

"Is it Pecos Porter?" Fowler demanded.

"Don't make me tell—ya-a-a-agh!"

McGann's words were bitten off, and his body went limp in Fowler's grasp. Clay Fowler scratched a match from a lucifer block he had in his pocket and glanced down at the land shark. McGann was dead from a knife in his back.

"Murdered!" Fowler cried. "I'll get the man who did this. Stand fast, everyone. Rest on your arms. We're waiting for daylight."

Fowler stood over the dead McGann, and studied his surroundings. The moon would be up until almost daylight. Then there was bound to be a brief period in which utter darkness would blanket the country. Clay Fowler planned to be on the edge of the basin, on a rise of ground where he could watch all sides. Any man who tried to ride away would probably be able to answer some interesting questions.

CHAPTER 19

Clay Fowler waited calmly until the moon went down. Then on moccasined feet he retraced his steps to the point where Captain Fred Larson was on guard. He explained the fine points of his plan, and the captain passed along the information to the other men in the area. The word went all the way around the line.

Then Fowler melted into the darkness and headed for the barn. He slipped through the open door on silent feet, and hoarsely called:

"Laddy Graham." There was no answer. Again he repeated the call: "Laddy Graham!"

Finally he heard light footsteps in the back of the barn. The old corporal was approaching. He came up to Fowler and asked:

"What is it?"

"You okay, Laddy?"

"Right as rain," the old campaigner told him. "I've been out helping you to sew this case into a canvas sack."

"Out where?" Fowler demanded.

"Tracking down that hombre with the fog horn voice," Graham declared.

"Any luck?" Fowler wanted to know.

"I won't know until daylight," Graham said with a chuckle. "Things sure ought to start popping then."

Clay Fowler explained his plan for trapping the leader if he tried to break away from the ring of armed guards. Then he went to take up his station. His keen eyes studied the area through the false dawn and past the glimmering light that came up from the east. But none of the possemen or McGann's group moved out of their positions.

"Looks like that plan was a bust," Fowler said to himself as he rose and stretched his cramped legs. "But Buck McGann must have been about ready to tell on his boss, or the big shot wouldn't have wanted to kill him."

With daylight brightening all about them, Fowler circulated around among his possemen and ordered them to move into the clearing, herding the McGann men before them.

When they were all assembled, Clay Fowler strolled around among them. He saw that McGann had been reinforced by Pecos Porter and his men. The marshal strode up to Porter and said:

"Good morning, Porter. So we meet again."

Pecos Porter studied the man before him. Obviously he realized that his position now was not nearly so secure as it had been when Clay Fowler was an unknown two gun-man.

"Hello, Fowler," Porter said grimly.

"Did you see what happened to McGann earlier this morning?"

"I did," Porter replied through dry lips. "And I figure that the same thing is likely to happen to me, if I talk too much."

Clay Fowler laughed. Then his glance ran along the group of possemen about him, and stopped for a moment on Comanche Carter. Then he looked beyond him to the familiar face of Silver Dollar Welch.

As Fowler's eyes rested on the horse trader, he walked toward him and said:

"Hello, Welch. When did you get here?"

Silver Dollar Welch studied the group around him, then replied:

"Marion looked me up in Enid, and told me that you were bringing a posse out here to keep Buck McGann and his men from wiping out your place here. She thought I might like to lend a hand. I had a few things to take care of in the Big Town, but as soon as I could shake free, I came along. Sorry I didn't get here sooner."

Laddy Graham stepped up to Clay Fowler and nudged him. Then there was a whispered exchange, and finally Fowler turned back to Welch and asked:

"Did you just ride in?"

"I sure did," Welch insisted. At the same time it was obvious that he was on his guard, and wondering what had prompted the marshal's question. Clay Fowler appeared to ignore him completely, for he walked around the group, and ordered various members of the posse to tie up the McGann crew. When he finally came up behind Welch, it was to note a broad smear of black on his light coat, and bits of hay across his shoulders.

"Silver Dollar!" he said crisply. "For a hombre who just arrived, you've sure gotten yourself branded up!"

Welch spun around, and his hand darted to his hip as though he were ready and willing to accept any challenge that Fowler might make.

"Branded?" Welch said. "What do you mean?"

"Since you've just arrived," Fowler said, with the air of a cat playing with a mouse, "we might tell you about what has been going on. During the night, we took prisoner a man called Buck McGann. I believe you met him up at Payne's Creek. He was about to tell us the name of the man who is the ringleader in all the trickery that has been plaguing the Cherokee Strip. Someone stabbed him to death with a throwing knife."

"Unfortunate!" Welch declared soberly.

"Too bad you didn't catch him."

"But we have caught him," Fowler replied quickly. "You see, this basin was surrounded by the posse. There was only one loophole in the ring, and that was the barn. Our clever murderer came through the barn, and thus passed inside the ring of possemen. But he didn't know that Laddy Graham was in the barn. Laddy dropped a wad of burned hay down on the knifer as he was making his retreat after the killing. Welch, that burned hay is on the back of your coat!"

The last sentence was roared out with all the crisp authority that was bound up in Fowler's marshal's commission. Welch whirled around and faced the young Missouri man.

Naturally Silver Dollar was unable to determine whether the telltale hay was on his back or not, but it was too late to investigate now. He darted to one side quickly. The skirt of his coat snapped back, and his hand darted for a gun butt like the striking head of a prairie rattler.

Men scattered in all directions, knowing that this was showdown. Laddy Graham, Comanche Carter, and others in the group all watched Clay Fowler's movements. They were leisurely and unconcerned as though Silver Dollar Welch's action didn't bother him at all.

Then when it looked as though Welch's gun were clear of leather and were leveling toward Fowler, Welch halted his draw and said:

"You reach for your gun, Fowler, and I'll plug the girl."

The young marshal turned slightly and saw that the Neale buckboard was on the edge of the yard with Mrs. Neale holding the reins, and Marion in the seat beside her mother. They were stunned by the drama into which they had so suddenly ridden. Clay Fowler looked from the girl to the renegade before him. It was obvious that neither Mrs. Neale nor her daughter knew what was going on.

Marion Neale leaped over the wheel and hurried through the group around Silver Dollar Welch. Instead of merely attempting to act as peacemaker, she amazed the group by rushing toward Welch and asking:

"What's going on here? Why is he threatening you?"

A curious smile crossed Welch's face as he realized that everything was not yet lost. He patted Marion gently on the shoulder, and said:

"I think everything is going to be all right now." Then with a gesture of his gun barrel that could not be misinterpreted, Silver Dollar Welch went on: "If you're going to be the law in Oklahoma, Mr. Fowler, I think the Neale family will want to move on."

"Move on?" Fowler was numb for a moment. Comanche Carter and the other men were watching the way he handled this situation. Pecos Porter was sneering openly.

"Yes, of course," Welch said suavely. "Apparently we don't agree on a number of things. I'm willing to call things quits here. You may find some interesting papers on the person of Mr. McGann. They will undoubtedly make a lot of people happy, but they don't point any accusing finger at me."

Clay Fowler looked at the man before him, then asked:

"Are you planning on marrying Marion Neale?"

"The lady has done me the honor to accept," Welch said calmly. "Does that make much difference to you?"

As he spoke, he put an arm around Marion's shoulder, and started with her toward the buckboard. Comanche Carter muttered something behind Fowler which sounded like:

"The marshal is able to round up the small fry, but he's sure letting the big shark swim right away."

This stiffened Fowler's resolve, and he said:

"Silver Dollar Welch, you're my prisoner. If you attempt to leave this clearing, I'll shoot, and I'll shoot to kill!"

"Ridiculous," Welch hurled back. "You won't take a chance on harming the girl." With his back to the crowd, he continued his journey to the buckboard. Fowler turned to Laddy Graham and muttered:

"Bring me the Winchester!"

While the other people in the group were rooted to the spot, Laddy Graham rushed into the hay barn, and came back a few moments later with the shiny barreled lever-action in his hand. He passed it to Clay Fowler. Welch and the girl were climbing into the buggy. In each of his actions the land shark genius was careful to keep the Kentucky girl between him and the group of possemen.

Then Mrs. Neale, as though pulled by the strings of a master puppeteer, gathered up the reins and clucked to the horses that were pulling the buckboard. The equipage moved up the winding slope that would disappear over the hill. There was a stunned silence in the clearing. Clay Fowler was the only one who appeared to know what he was going to do.

He knelt carefully, leveled his Winchester, and aimed for a spot on the horizon where the rutted wagon trail passed out of the basin. The click of the wheels and the clop of the horses' hoofs were the only sounds. Then, just as the carriage topped the rise, Welch turned around to wave his hand in a gesture of defiance.

"Brang!" Fowler's rifle exploded. Buckboard and horses vanished on the far side of the basin rim, and then there was the sound of runaway broncs.

Fowler dropped the gun, ran toward where his Ranger horse was ground-hitched, and leaped aboard the animal bareback. The gray gelding swung up the grade, and topped the rise without delay. Just about ten feet on the flat breast of the prairie there was a sprawled figure. Fowler breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was a man.

Some distance ahead, the panicky horses were now slowing down, unable to fight the double weight of the two women on the reins that were sawing at their bits.

Clay Fowler cantered up alongside the buckboard, gripped the horses by the bridles, and turned the wagon back toward the clearing. By this time a number of men, with Comanche Carter in the lead, boiled out onto the green prairie, and gathered around the recumbent form of Silver Dollar Welch.

Carter turned the man over, saw the blue-rimmed hole in the right temple, and whistled.

"Boy," he said, "I'd hate to have that Fowler gent drawing a bead on me. Looks like Silver

Dollar Welch made one bet too many."

Marion's face went pale as they drove past the body. She looked at Clay Fowler with a puzzled expression on her face and asked:

"What's behind it all?"

"You, and your horses," Fowler said soberly. "Your father was coming West to meet a partner, but I'm sure Welch wasn't the man."

Now that much of the tension had been broken on the Fowler-Graham place, some of the men busied themselves with the job of making breakfast for the group. Marion and the young marshal took the buckboard with Mrs. Neale around to the far side of the barn. There, Clay Fowler said:

"One of the men is bringing me the papers Buck McGann was carrying. I believe they are the option papers that McGann was buying from the boomers. Wes Gillen probably saw your father's papers while making him the offer that led to his death. While the wallet was missing from your father's body, Welch managed to secure the information that made it possible for him to masquerade as your father's partner."

"I think we understand," Mrs. Neale declared. "We've learned a lesson now."

The older woman strolled off and left the young people alone. Clay and Marion had a good many things to talk over, and they had lost something like three weeks out of their lives, because of Silver Dollar Welch and his masquerade.

"How did you happen to suspect Silver Dollar?" Marion asked.

"Oh," Fowler replied, "there were several reasons. First of all, there was the pat way in which he arrived to take care of you at the moment your father died. Then there was the incident at the Indian encampment. Someone poisoned Barbed Arrow against me, and later Welch admitted visiting the Indian camp to discuss a cattle and horse deal. Finally there was the matter of the posse last night in Enid."

Marion shook her head knowingly, and remarked:

"We owe a lot to the person who told Captain Larson about McGann's plan to attack the Red Rock Creek place here."

"That's right," Fowler admitted. "If it hadn't been for that, Silver Dollar Welch wouldn't have been forced out into the open. I'll have to ask the captain about that."

"That won't be necessary," said a third voice. Both Marion and Clay Fowler turned around. They saw the sultry and exotic Kitty Trotter standing near them. She was holding the reins of a horse in her hand. The animal was limned against the horizon like some mystic equine monument. "I told the captain," she concluded.

"Why did you do that?" Fowler asked, even though he sensed that he knew the answer.

"Because I loved Welch!" Kitty Trotter said slowly. "I expected him to marry me. He planned to force Marion Neale into marriage, and I knew that would be the end of my happiness. You were kind to me, Clay Fowler. I tried to repay you—you and Laddy Graham."

Clay Fowler and the girl watched the tragic expression on the girl's face. She wished them happiness, then strode on with firm step toward the spot near the hay barn where Lester Welch's body rested under a bit of tarpaulin, where it had been carried by Carter and his men.

"She loved him, so she led him to his death!" Marion said soberly. "I wonder whether I could have done a thing like that."

"Let's not think about anything like that," Fowler told the girl. "Let's plan to live for each other, instead of dying for each other."

Marion Neale was willing.

CHAPTER 20

Incidents moved along at a rapid pace on Red Rock Creek for the balance of the day. The marshal's posse broke up, and Carter and a number of the men took McGann's gunmen back to Enid to the Army jail. Lieutenant Norton and his men rode in and reported to Captain Larson.

Kitty Trotter supplied many of the details of the land-grafting plot, and McGann's body yielded up the option papers that would be turned back to their original owners so that they could enjoy the Cherokee property that a wise Government had opened up for them.

Several men elected to stay with Laddy Graham and help him rebuild the ranch house, while Clay Fowler continued his law enforcement in the Territory.

"But," laughed Fowler, "gun law and Government law will have to wait until I see Marion Neale and her mother safely back to the horse ranch—until we find time to make the two ranches into one unit."

Marion Neale blushed becomingly, and her mother smiled at the suggestion. Late that afternoon the buckboard moved out of the Fowler-

Graham yard, but this time it had another mounted escort. They headed due west toward the railroad tracks of the Kansas and Texas, and beyond to the grazing grounds of the Kentucky thoroughbreds that had been destined to warm the heart of Colonel Forsythe Neale.

Thoughts of the old colonel were in the minds of the trio as they rode, and Mrs. Neale said:

"I'm still not quite clear as to just how you sensed that Silver Dollar Welch was not the partner the colonel hoped to meet."

"That's simple," laughed Clayton Fowler. "You see, I was the partner. I never got to know your husband personally, and I'm sure it was a real loss to me. But I'm hoping to make up for it with his family."

Marion Neale reached out and gripped his arm. Clay Fowler beamed down on her. Ranger shook his head as though he didn't like the idea at all. Neither Marion nor Clay Fowler appeared to worry about this, however.

THE END

10-23

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